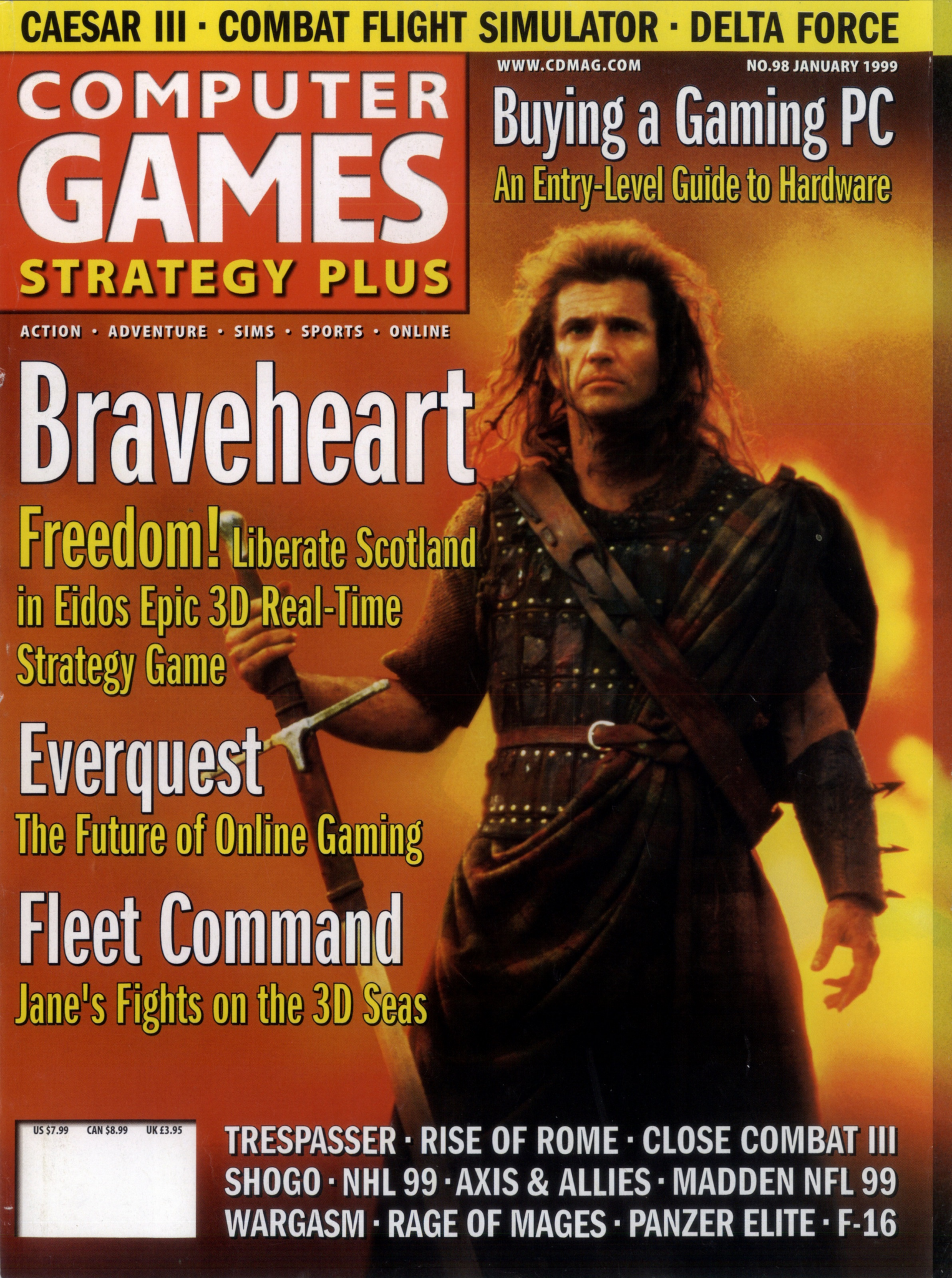
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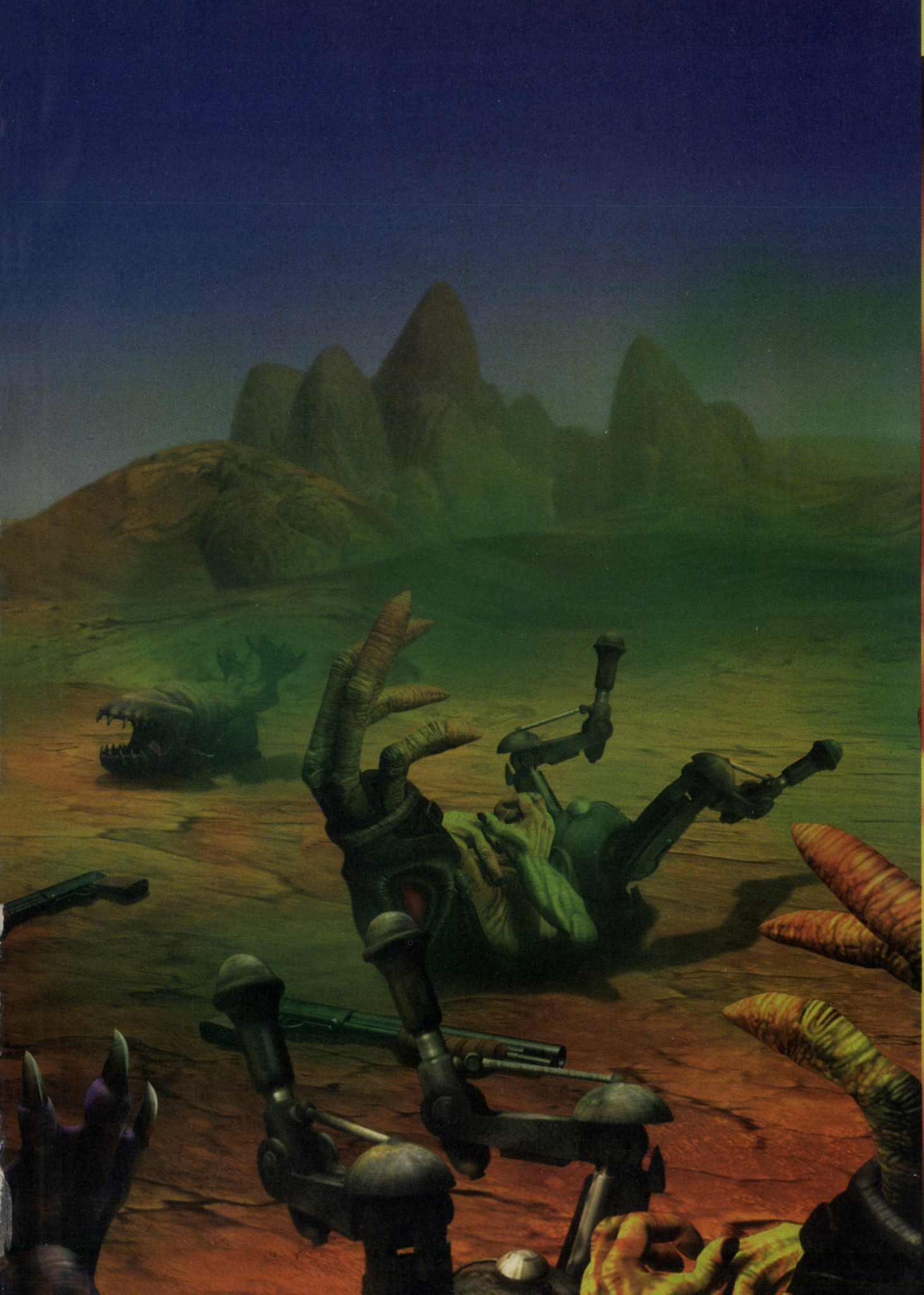
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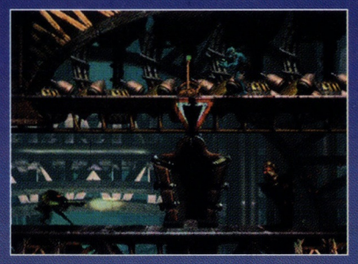
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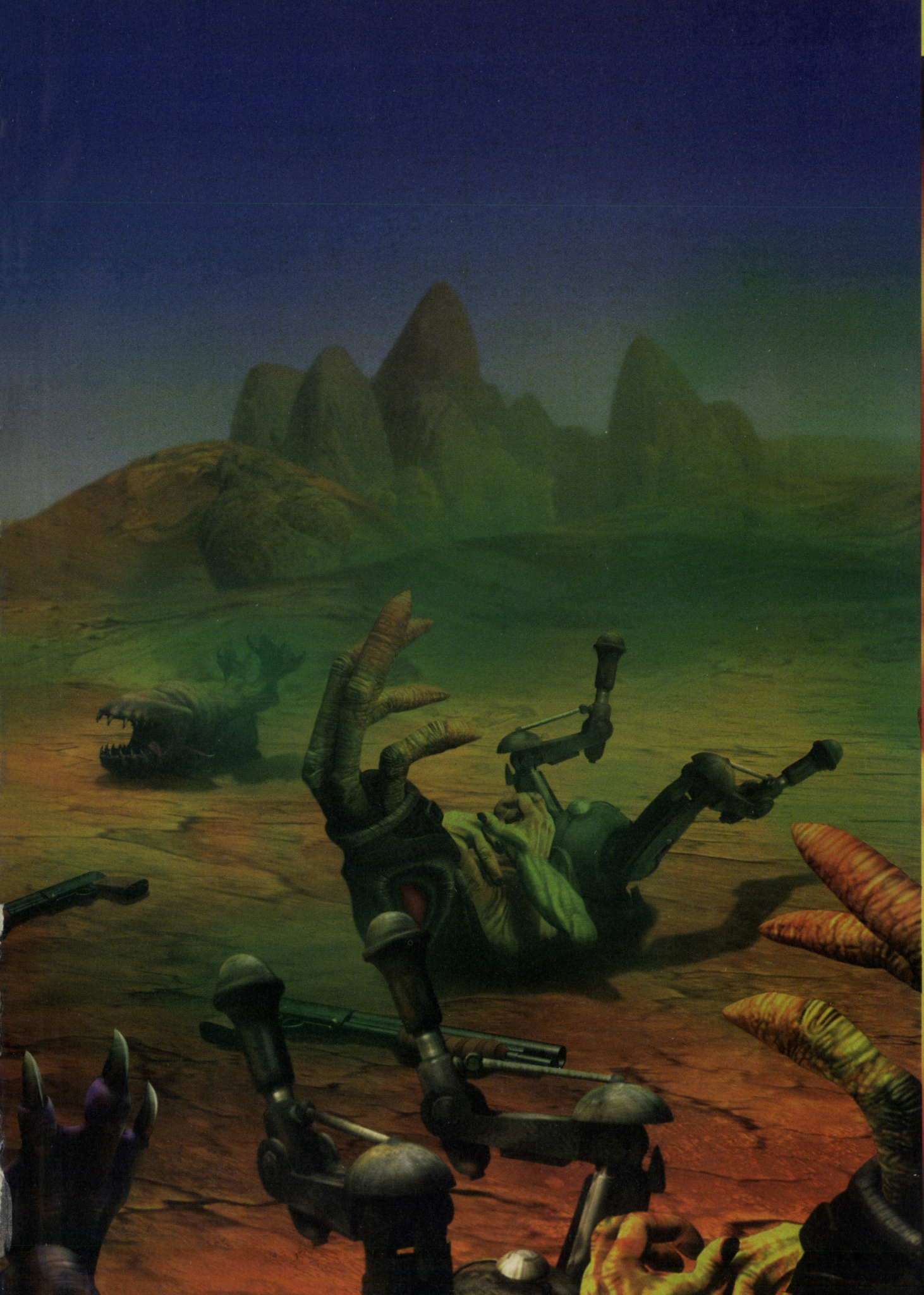
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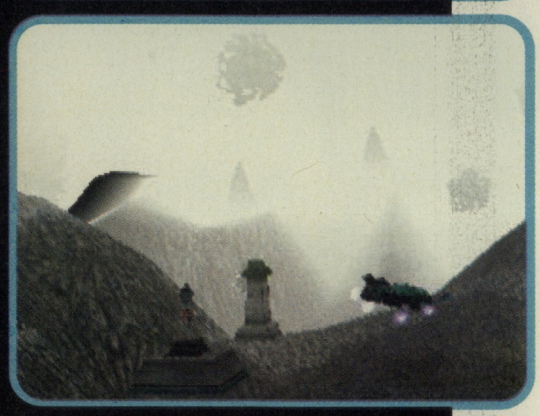
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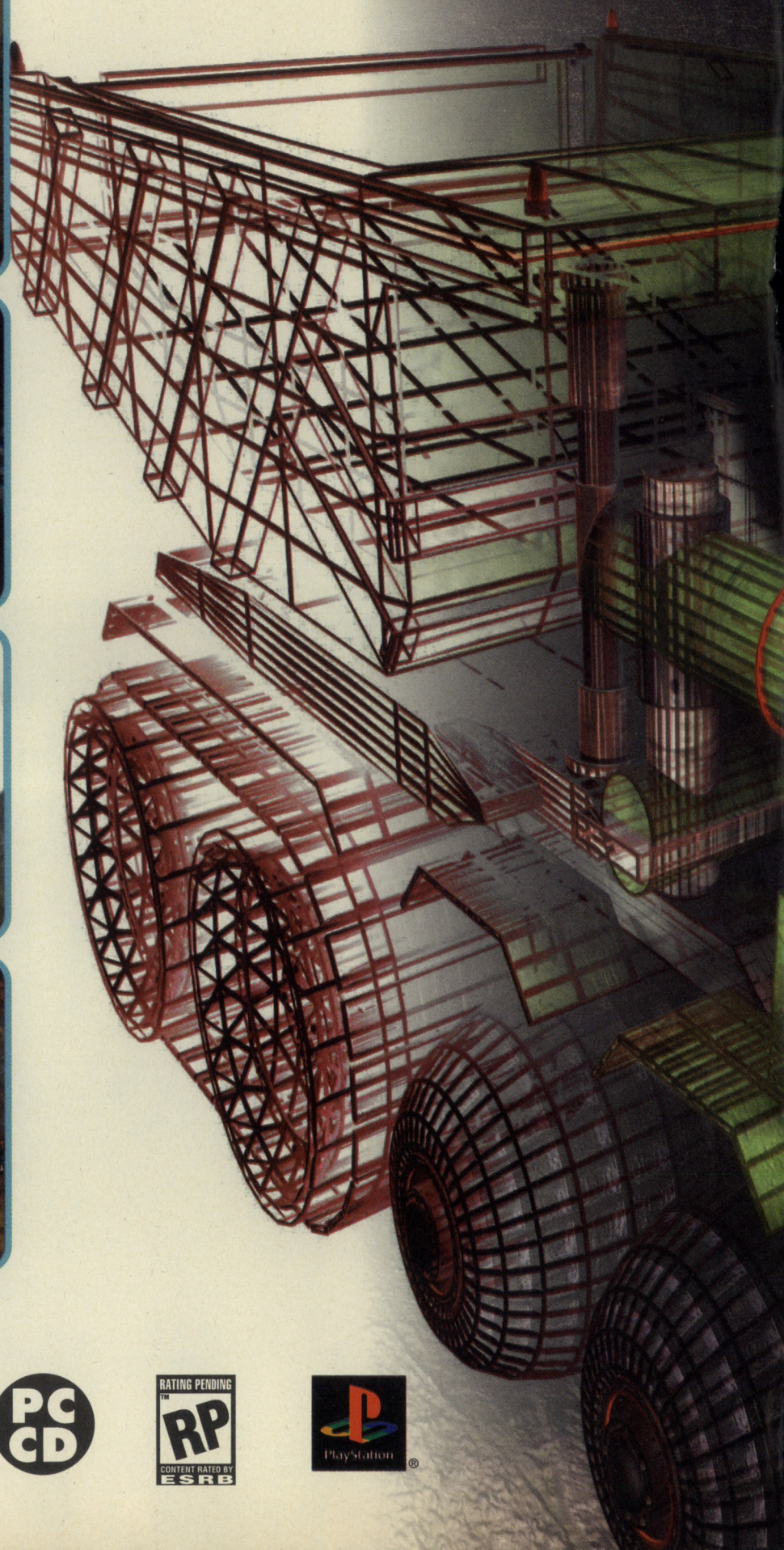












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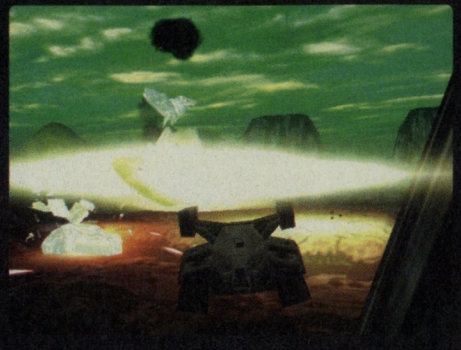
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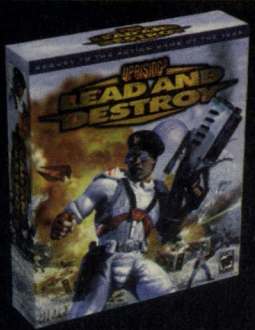
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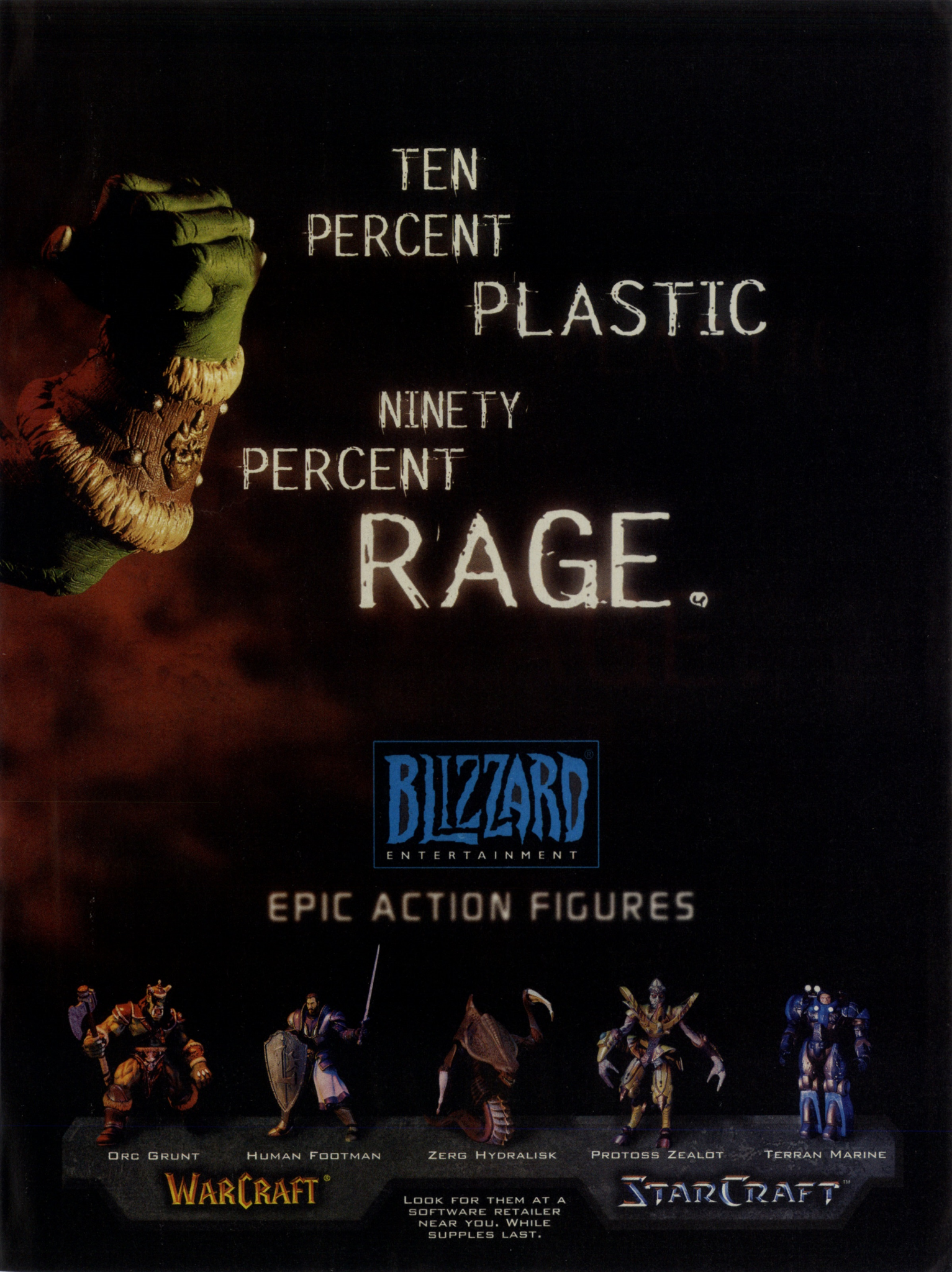
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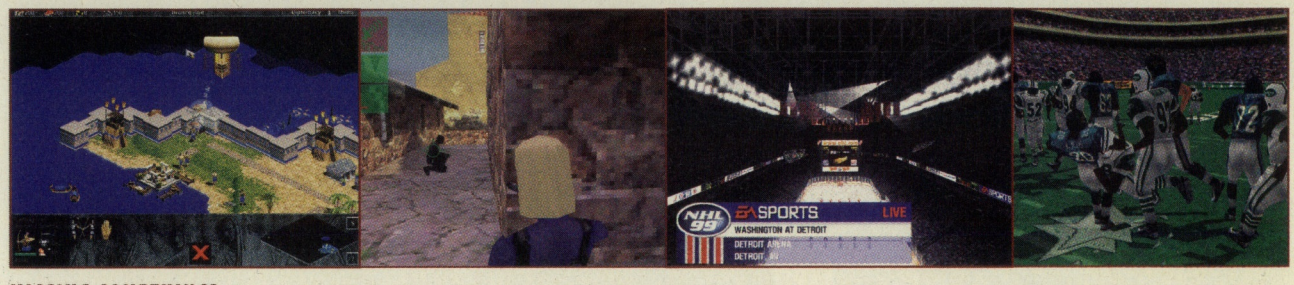


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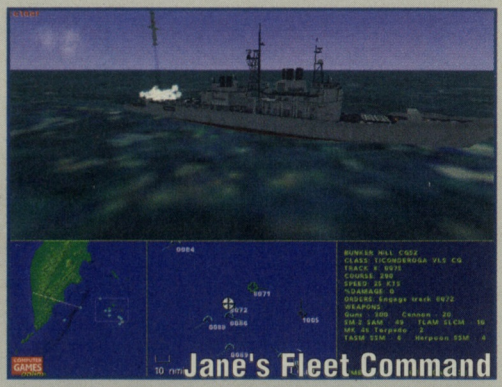
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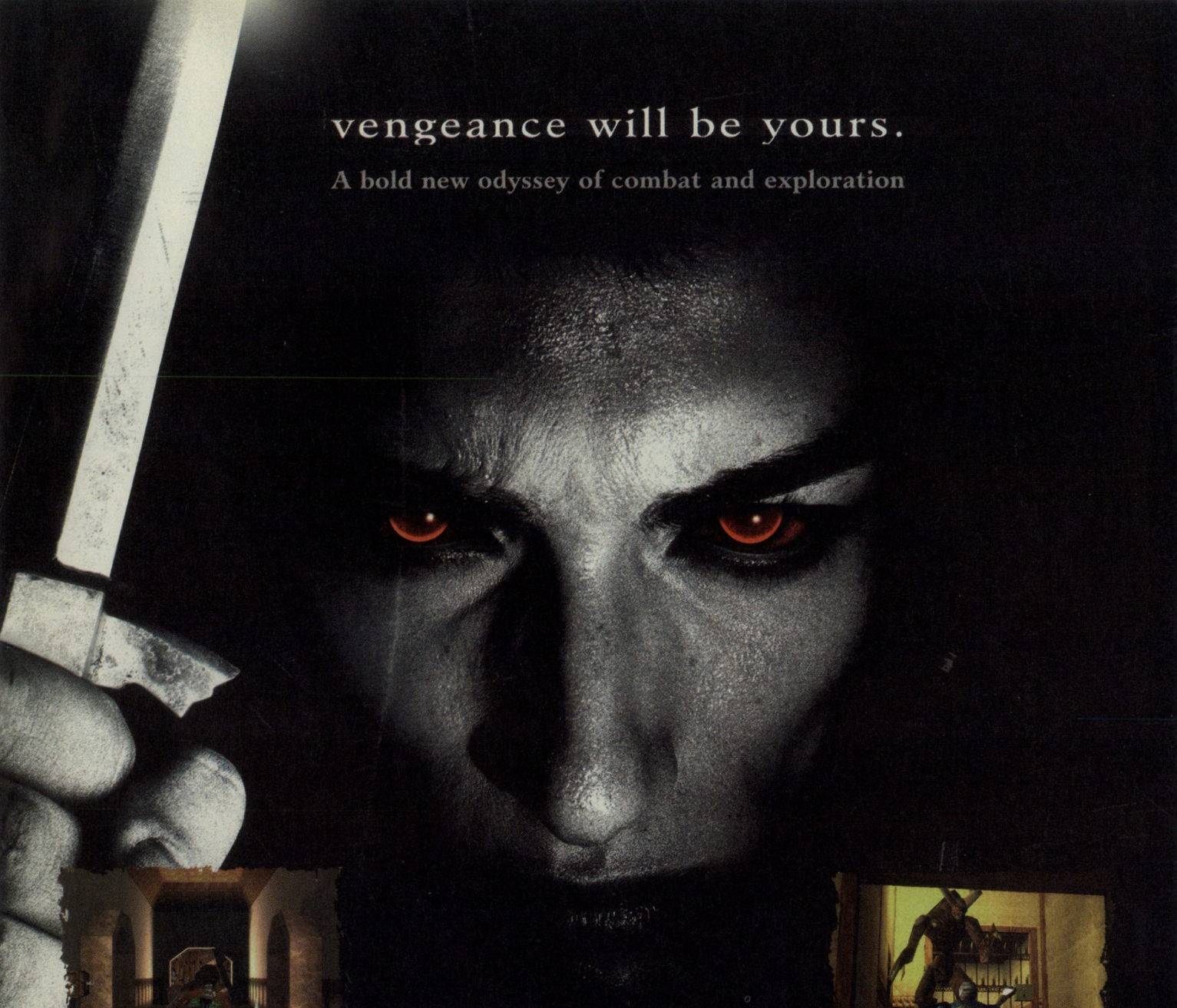
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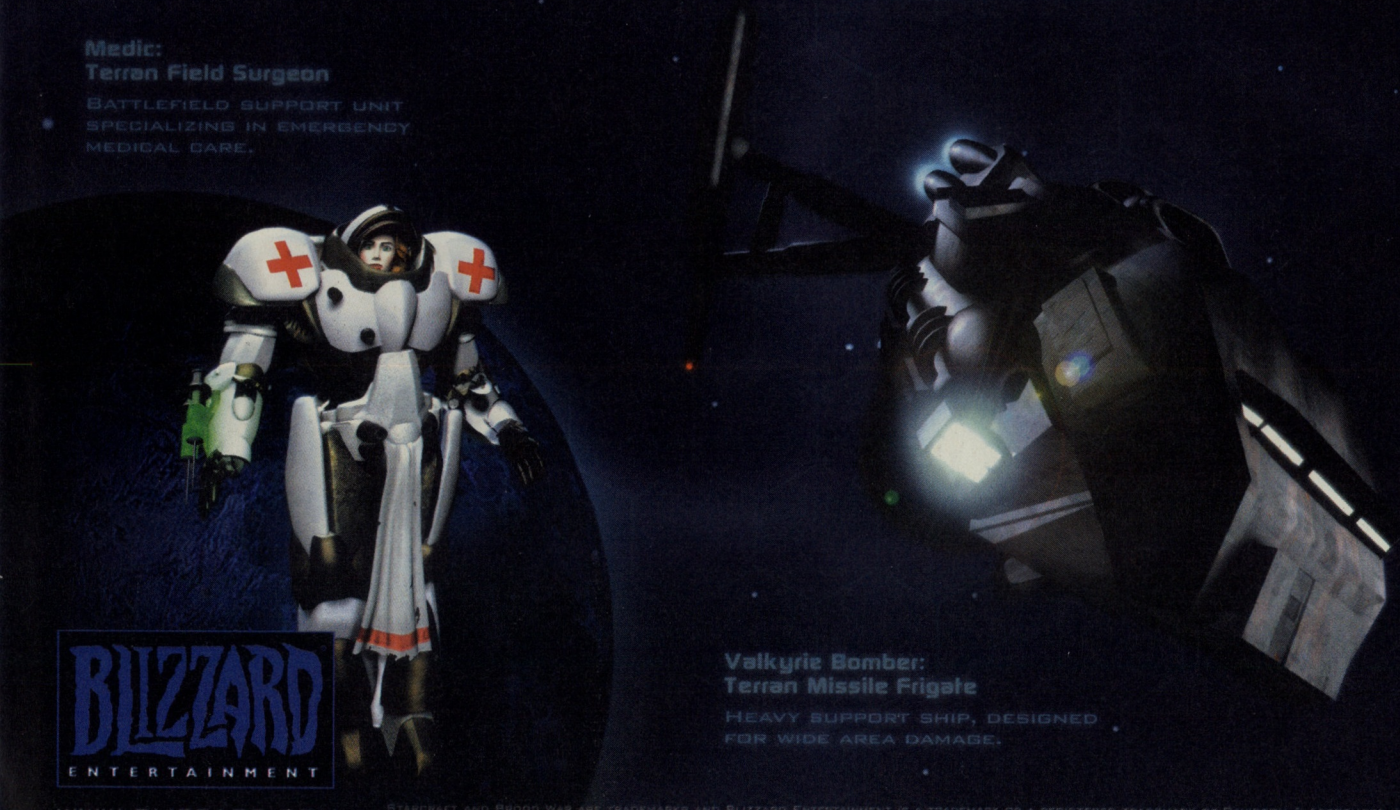
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In the red

The cause of industry-wide losses by Steve Bauman

It seems that every other major game publisher announced "disappointing" earnings for the quarter ending September 30. Many were experiencing higher than ever revenues while at the same time reporting even higher losses.

What exactly is causing the bleeding? Missed ship dates, the bane of the industry, are often targeted as the cause, as they're usually the main source of the bloated development costs that put the companies in the red. So what causes missed ship dates? It's easy to blame poor project management, but there's one thing that's constantly exacerbating the problem with shipping things on time—the moving hardware platform.

The entire computer industry is always looking ahead—buy a Pentium II today and you'll hear that Katmai is on the way. Get a 100MHz bus and you'll hear about the new 133MHz bus. It never stops. This forces developers to spend an inordinate amount of time playing catch-up with regard to hardware specs—time that would perhaps be better spent evolving and refining gameplay. Technological innovation at the expense of compelling gameplay—it's the same old story.

With a fixed hardware platform, designers are forced to engage the gamer on a cerebral (gameplay) rather than emotional (technological) level. When you look at some of the console systems, its no coincidence that some of the best games come at the end of the machine's perceived market life. One look at the game *Metal Gear Solid* for the PlayStation is proof enough; it looks good (though not as good as a game like *Unreal*), but most importantly its gameplay is more refined than other like-minded PC games (*Rainbow Six* and *Vigilance* come immediately to mind). Perhaps

The moving hardware platform hurts everyone, yet it seems we're all powerless to stop it

it's the nature of the PlayStation being a stable hardware platform that allowed them to focus all of their energy on creating a superior gameplay experience. They probably weren't distracted by a new 3D sound API, or by having to support two emerging 3D accelerator chipsets. Their programmers were probably tuning controls and tweaking engines rather than trying to graft support for some new standard at the eleventh hour.

In order for companies to remain profitable, they also need to ship products that people want to buy. Consider the games from Blizzard Entertainment. Rather than spend multiple years being distracted by technology development, the "low-tech" *StarCraft* and *Diablo* succeeded because they have compelling and addicting gameplay. And each game has sold over a million copies. However, game companies continue to think that technological innovation is the only way to sell a game, that Blizzard's games are somehow the exception to the rule.

PC developers are faced with a conundrum: develop for today's machine and risk technological obsolescence when your product ships, or guess which emerging hardware standards will dominate and risk delays crafting games for tomorrow's machine. If you choose the former path, you might have more time to "tune" the gameplay. Plus you have a chance at reaching more potential PC gamers as your product will run on more machines; however, studies show that owners of "tomorrow's" machine are more likely to actually buy software. This leads to the belief that it makes more sense and is actually safer to develop for tomorrow's machine, assuming you can absorb the extra costs and "guess" correctly. (All of those people spending development time and money on support for VR helmets and MPEG cards raise your hands.)

To some extent the moving hardware platform has been a problem since Origin started pushing hardware boundaries in the early '90s; however, in those days the industry was preaching to a smaller number of hardcore gamers, people willing to shell out money for sound cards and that new 386 processor. Today it's trying to reach a larger audience of people who haven't resigned themselves to yearly upgrades, people who don't understand or care about 3D acceleration.

The moving hardware platform hurts everyone, yet it seems we're all powerless to stop it. Its hard to see a point where technological evolution slows and the PC platform becomes stable. If that occurs, perhaps developers could focus on creating compelling gameplay experiences rather than marketable technology. Until then, let's hope consumers aren't alienated by the proliferation of mediocre graphic demos masquerading as games or, worse yet, products that don't work on their brand-new machines. ■



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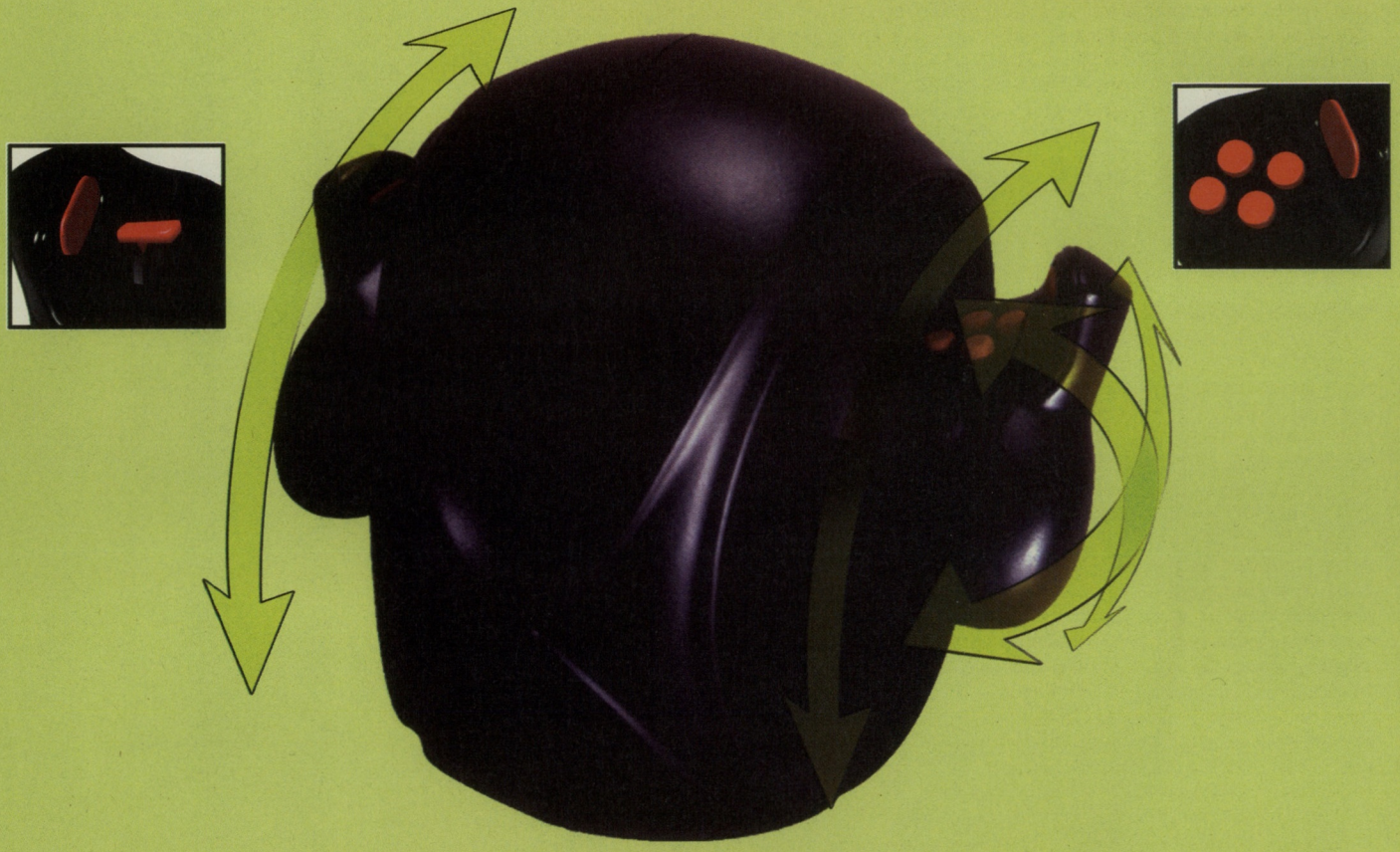
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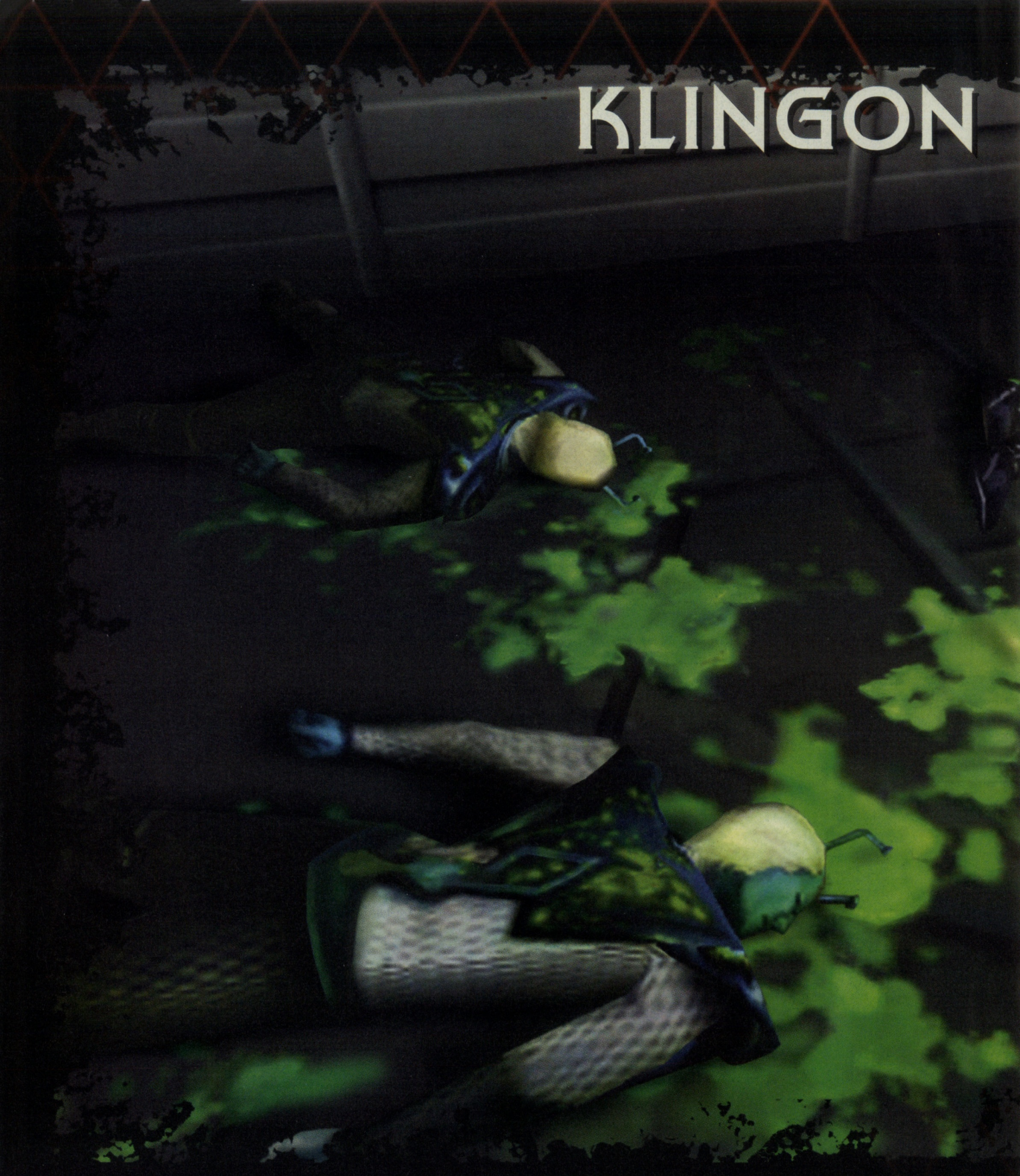


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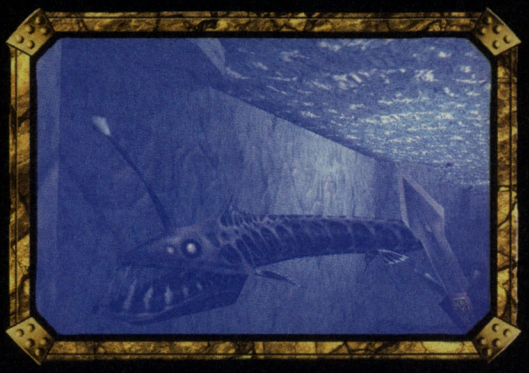
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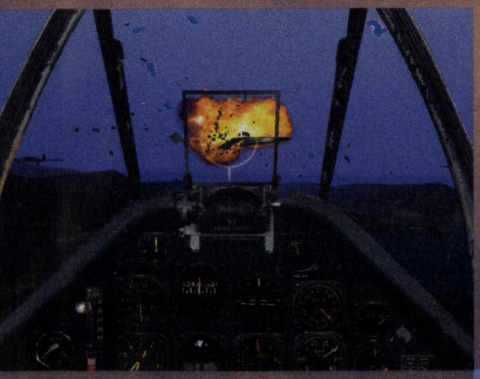
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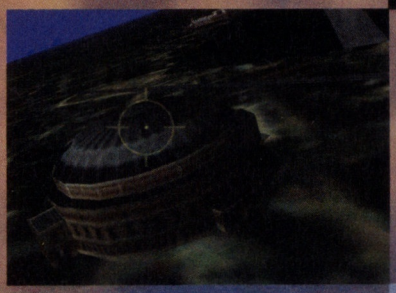
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The Future is Hear II

You really want real-time voice in online games by André Vrignaud

All right, so the future really isn't "hear" yet… and many of you decided to comment on the fact after my last column. (For those of you just joining us, the column in question simply stated my opinion that online gaming was in a bit of a rut, and that the one thing that was really needed to truly advance the online gaming experience was support for real-time voice capabilities.)

Quite a few of you took the time to write in, and one trend became quite obvious. It seems as though all of you unanimously agree that real-time voice support is something that's highly desired. Heck, some of you went beyond that and claimed that real-time voice support is something that's *required* for you to be able to enjoy online gaming. I wanted to take a moment to share some of these responses with you, and I hope they will be enlightening to some of you out there in the industry.

A couple of you liked the idea of voice support simply because you had your own individual reasons for not wanting to type. A D.L. Atkins wrote in and said that "I have not play[ed] on the Internet because of all the typing. I want to react to the game condition, not respond to another player by typing a message."

Another reader named "Edward" continued by stating, "Admittedly, I am a weak typer. In all honesty, I tell people I'm a pecker [*hmm?–ed.*]… it can be slow and tedious, and I can only do the typing or watching (never both at the same time)."

Interesting, isn't it? Both of these people love to *play*, but they don't want to deal with typing all the time, either because they're weak typists, or because it detracts from the quality of the game.

Another trend to take note of—many of you who wrote have invested a great deal of money in your systems, and would prefer to see real-time voice support as an addition to those systems, rather than necessitating purchasing an entire new system. To quote a Mr. John Hamilton, "We don't want to hear anything about something as important as real-time voice communications requiring a new computer. Let's make it software that uses DirectX… or make it a daughtercard for our SoundBlasters, or at worst, an additional PCI board, though not all of us have free PCI slots."

…it should say a lot to the industry types out there that people are going to such lengths to be able to simply talk while playing…

While I agree in principle, I fear that to do simultaneous, real-time voice right (*i.e.*, with more than one person speaking at a time), there's likely a need for some additional hardware. Clever software coding will only go so far to combat echo-cancellation. Another way to think of it: there's a reason those office-quality speaker phones from Polycom cost so much. Don't even think about that speakerphone switch on your phone base at home—that level of quality ain't gonna cut it.

And while we're on this topic of gamers having a great deal invested in their systems, let's up the ante a little and look at the people who believed that real-time voice support was so important that they went and built dedicated gaming LANs within their homes! One gentleman in particular sticks in my mind, a Mr. Glenn Kletzky, MD who wrote in and said, "I put together a LAN squadron in my home and we have monthly squad meets. To further my fanatical love of multiplay, I took one of their [the squadron members] ideas (using CB radios to communicate) and my electrical engineering background, and designed a custom Comms cable for CB multiplayer environments. My 100 MBPS LAN supports 12, and we play mostly *EF 2000* and *Longbow 2*."

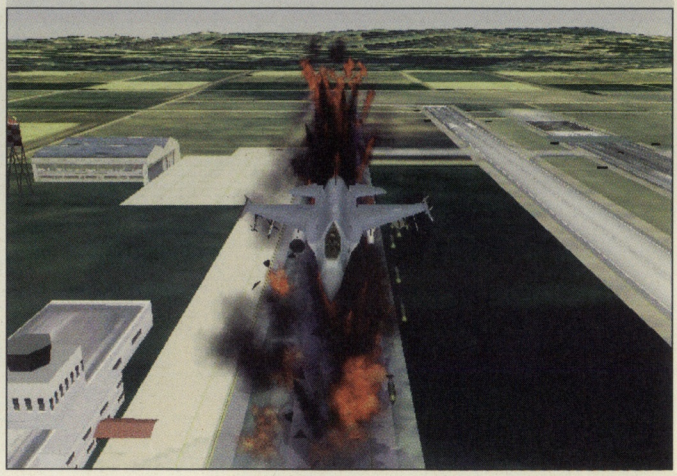
Now admittedly, not many of us have the resources and time to build up such a comprehensive solution to not just multiplayer gaming, but real-time voice *during* that gaming. That said, though, it should say a lot to the industry types out there that people are going to such lengths to be able to simply *talk* while playing, and I'm sure you've noticed there's a lot of good money being spent to do so. It definitely seems as though the market is there for some product that allows this—say, something priced at $50 or under. Take a page from *FireTeam*, and put together a package with the same sort of headset, but do a deal with Microsoft to build a voice support API into future versions of DirectX. It'll take some work, but it's technically very feasible.

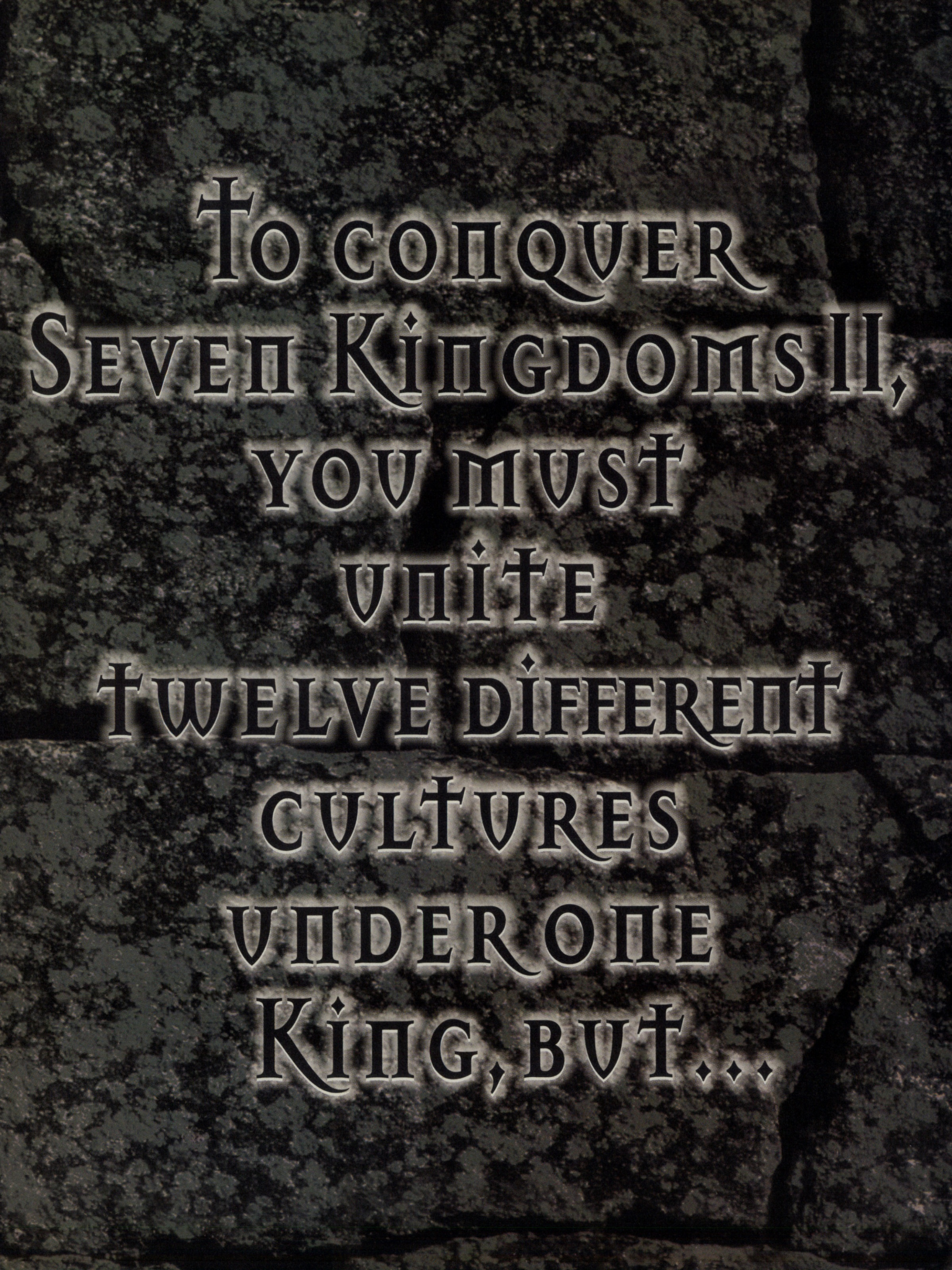
So talk to us. Any of you out there who could make this happen. What's keeping this from becoming a reality? Is anybody *doing* anything to address this need? Please, drop us a note and fill us in. I'll be happy to pass along anything we get! ■

New 3D shooters such as Shogo from Monolith are just begging for real-time voice support in multiplayer death matches…



…as are forthcoming air combat simulations such as Falcon 4.0, from MicroProse. Is anybody out there listening?




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What's in a label?

Buzzwording run amok by Scott Udell

Hmm. "Wargame?" Gasp! No! We can't call it that! Everyone knows that wargames are things played by hoary old men who push cardboard squares across hex-gridded maps (and besides, aren't "hexes" things of the devil?). No, no, we mustn't have our game associated with that! It's hip, it's cool, we want it to sell! Strategy, it's got to have strategy in the title! What? You say the game is at an operational level that has nothing to do with strategy and everything to do with tactics? Bah! Who's ever heard of a tactical game! No, we can't use that—gamers would never understand. What? You say that hard-core gamers do understand? To heck wit' 'em! We want the mass market, and the mass market is dumb as stumps. Real time! It's gotta be real-time—after all, kids play these things right, and kids play console games, so it's gotta be real-time. What? You say that while kids are welcome to play the game it's really aimed at adults looking for a detailed gaming experience? Don't be silly—everyone knows that only kids buy these things. So. Real-time, and strategy… yes! Real-time strategy! RTS! Just like Command & Conquer*! [Our imaginary "suit" dances a jig.] Huh? You say that most Clone & Conquers haven't done nearly the numbers of C&C? Oh, but our game will! What? You say our game's nothing like C&C? Oh, go away! Everyone knows C&C sold jillions of units, and that's because that's all that gamers want or will buy. Besides, who cares if it's not? We can ride its coattails to mega-sales! You say it's deceiving the gamer? So what?! We just want to sell games—we don't actually have any pride in what we're doing. Hmm, what else is hot? 3D—yes, it must support 3Dfx. And hunting! We've got to tie hunting into it somehow….*

Okay, so perhaps the preceding paragraph is a tad heavy on the sarcasm, but I just had to get it out of me. It's a subject that's been floating around in my head for a while, but I only decided to devote this column to the subject of labels in strategy gaming ("strategy" itself being a much-abused label, from the press to the publishers to gamers themselves). The trigger was a trip to Sonalysts Studios, the folks developing Jane's Combat Simulations' *Fleet Command*. The Jane's folks there *reeeaaally* want me to refer to the game as a "real-time strategy" game instead of a "wargame," the classification we'd normally use for it (just like the folks at their parent company, EA, wanted us to call *Sid Meier's Gettysburg* a real-time strategy game instead of a wargame). While the game does run in real-time, and it is easy to use, it's really nothing like a pure *Command & Conquer*, so why call it a real-time strategy game? In my very most cynical moments I think publishers really may be trying to "ride the coattails" of *C&C*, that they know their game is nothing like it but don't care—they just want the quick sale.

Most of the time, though, I think it's confusion brought about the labeling that we—the press, the publishers, the developers, and gamers—use. "RTS" has come to mean, in the eyes of many (most?) hard-core gamers, *Command & Conquer* or *Starcraft* or their ilk, completely excluding other strategy games that run in real-time (*SimCity*? *Populous*?). Because a few very popular (and extremely well-selling) games got stuck with this label, confusion has set in, and publishers think that their game has to have that label to sell. Bungie, for example, strongly considered calling *Myth* a real-time tactical game but felt that tactical was "too fuzzy," that gamers wouldn't understand what the game was, so *Myth* gets lumped in with RTS instead. Likewise, *Fleet Command*, which might be described as a continuous-time naval tactics game [pssst—wargame!] gets the label RTS in the hopes that it won't be dismissed by gamers. All of this, though, really ignores the mass-market gamer, who may just call them all—*C&C*, *Myth*, *or Fleet Command*—war games.

You know, though—a real-time strategy hunting game with 3D support really *does* sound interesting…. ■

Strategy, it's got to have strategy in the title! What? You say the game is at an operational level that has nothing to do with strategy and everything to do with tactics? Bah!



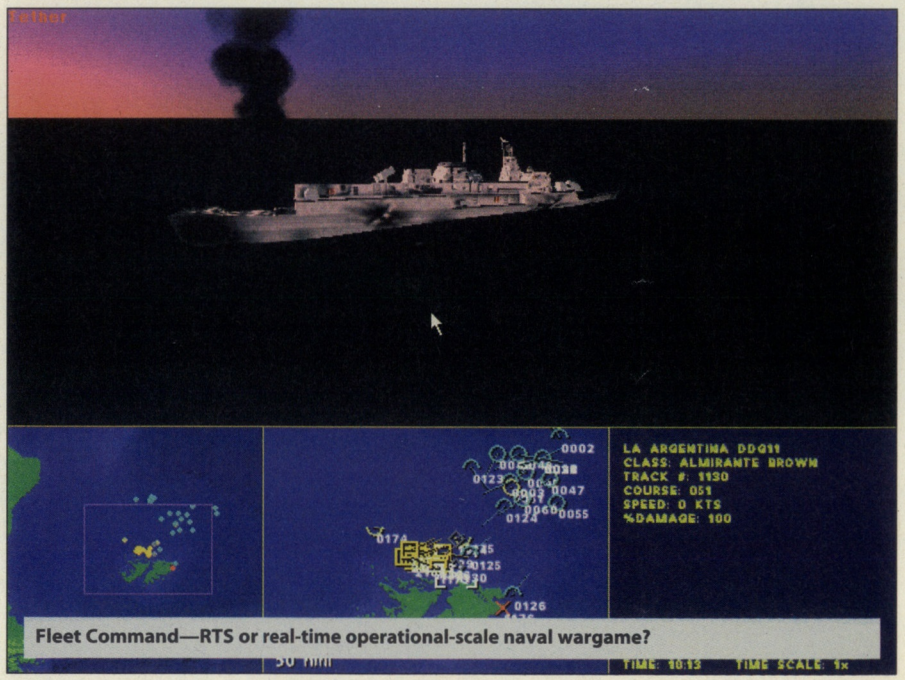
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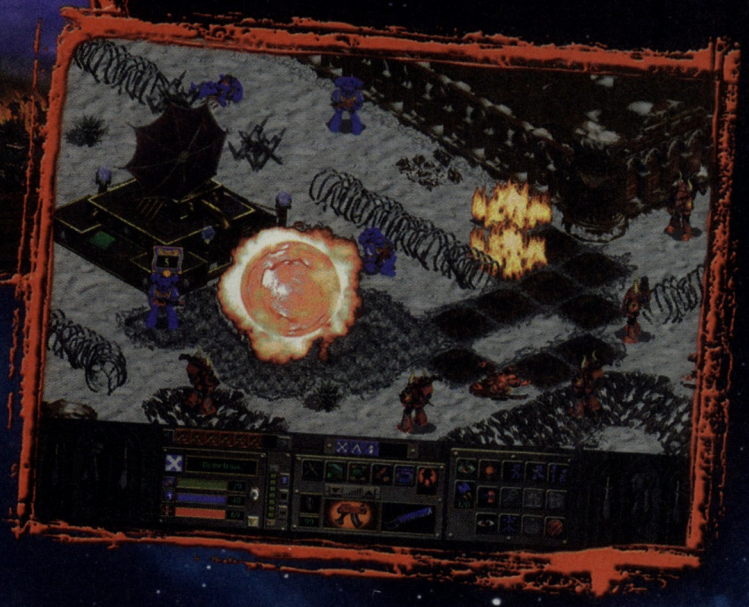
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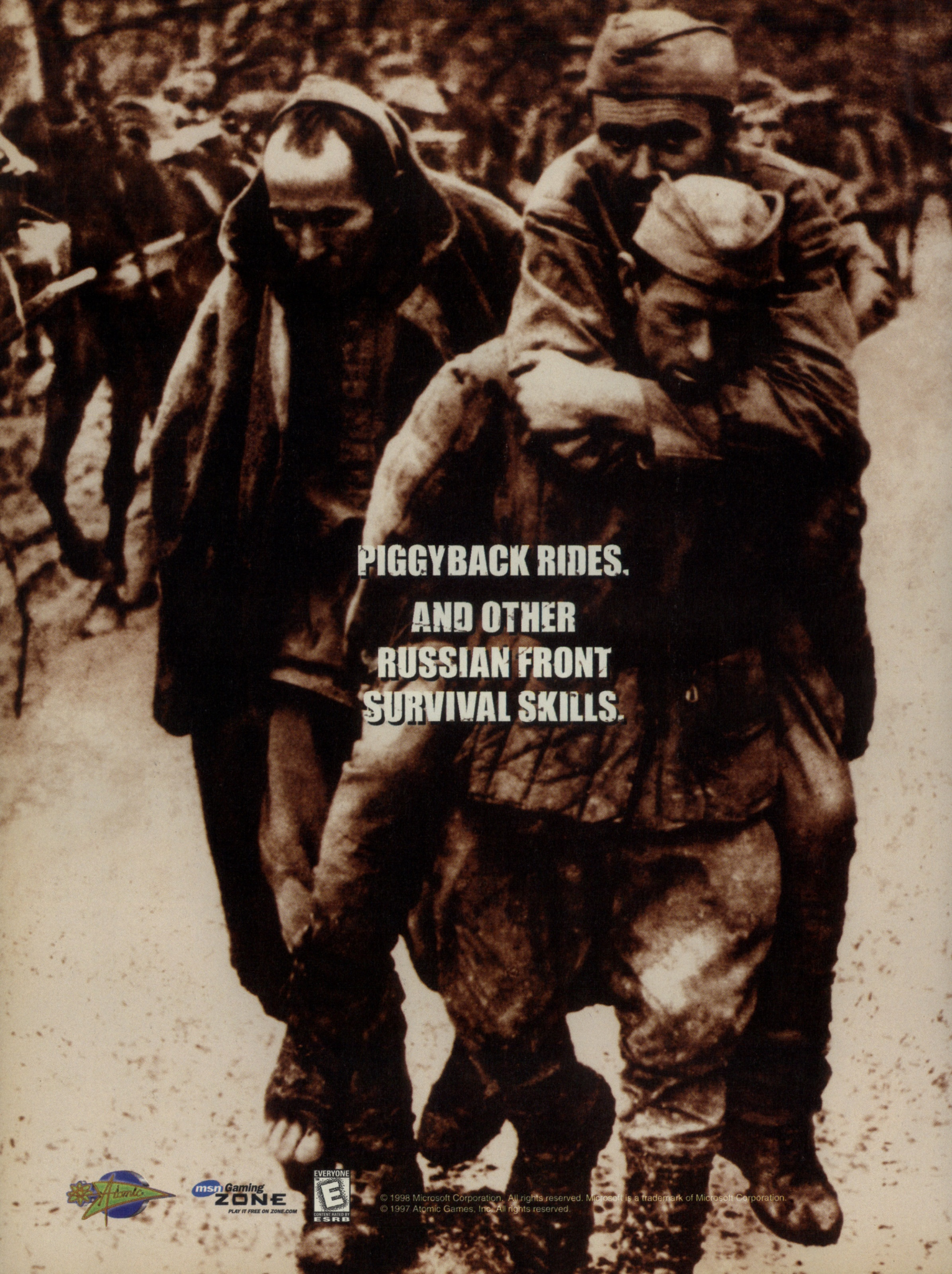
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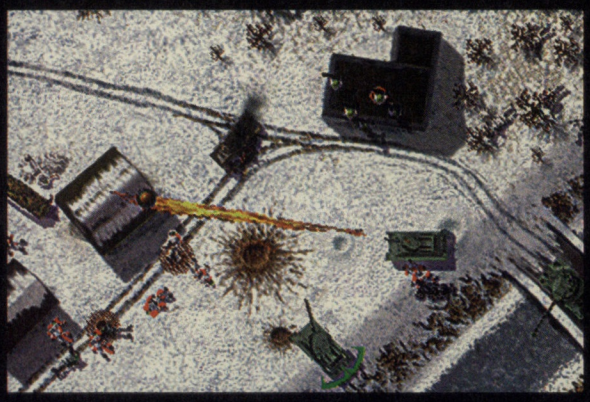
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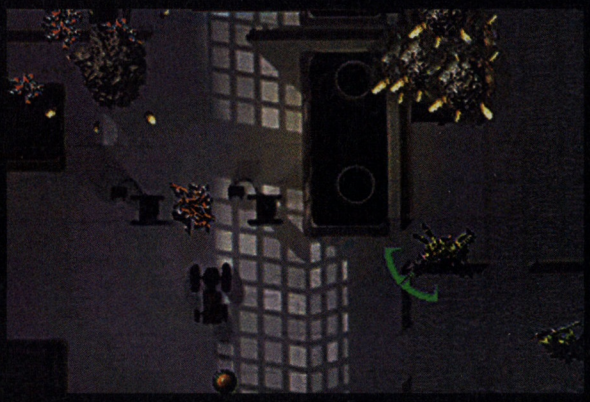
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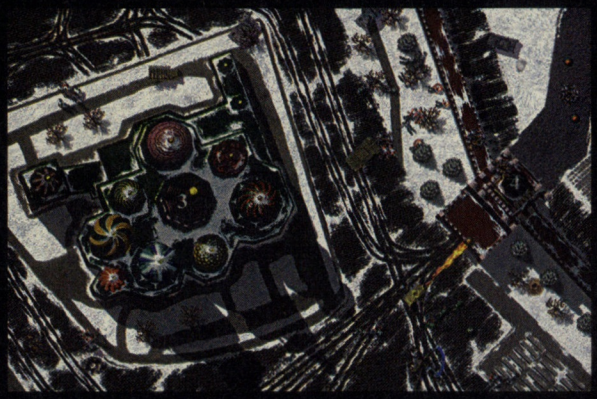


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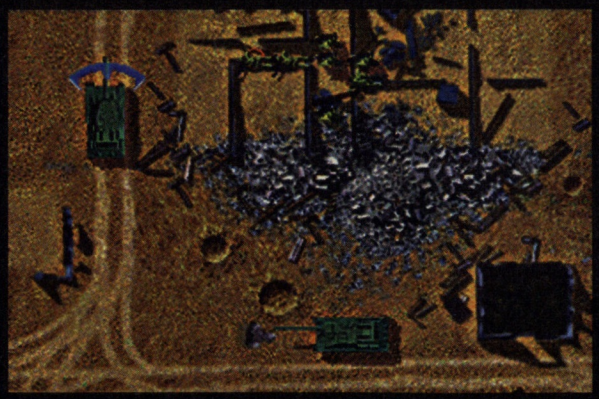


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When passion turns to pain

Developers fight baby-with-the-bathwater syndrome by Cindy Yans

A while ago, a mysterious CD appeared on the corner of my desk. No one admits to having put it there, but I have my suspicions. The front cover of the hybrid disk proclaims "Find your way from the stage door to curtain up in…BACKSTAGE Computer Game & Audio Book starring Carol Channing," all nicely centered, of course; and in what almost appears to be a larger font than the one used for "Carol Channing," we have "by Clarence Sheridan." Frightened to look at the back cover as passers-by in the hallway shouted, "No! Don't do it! Nooooo!" I carefully turned it over.

My worst fears were realized. It is an adventure-game-and-multimedia product-in-one, designed to introduce the uninitiated to the exciting world of theater. I read the informational letter-to-the-editor that came with it, perused the glowing quote from one Toby Simkin of BuyBroadway.com; understood that I would be treated to over 60 minutes of audio containing Carol Channing's amusing personal and theatrical anecdotes; realized that I would be face-to-face with her "in an actual Broadway dressing room" via Quicktime VR; saw that the minimum system requirements are a 385 [sic] and a sound card. I put it, er, over there, and thought, "Well, maybe someday…."

About a week later, I received a call from Mr. Sheridan asking how I liked the product. I gulped, and told him honestly that I hadn't had a chance to look at it yet, and (rummaging through the piles of debris on my desk) asked him to refresh my memory. I remembered (and found!) the CD and popped it in as we spoke. So, of course it *looked* like it would run on a 385 (or even a 384), and boasted a cast of characters that included some of Mr. Sheridan's friends and relatives, all stills, of course. I told him that I would probably not review it myself, but had a freelancer in mind that might, er, do it justice. When pressed, I said that it looked a bit…"dated" (old), and "rough around the edges" (cheesy), and he then became very icy and promptly revoked my permission to review it. "But you sent it to me." "But I'm telling you now that you can't do it." "But you sent it to me." "But I'm changing my mind…." And so it went. I had called his baby ugly, and that is unforgivable under any circumstances.



Led, Maya and Selena, the women of SepterraCore

Developers are so much like parents, so completely devoted to their creations that they cannot have open-minded objectivity



Backstage's Gondola of the Opera



Ms. Channing actually volunteered for this

Developers are so much like parents, so completely devoted to their creations that they cannot have open-minded objectivity. And we can't blame them—often it's years of their lives (in Mr. Sheridan's case, almost four) that have been focused on nurturing their creations. They envision, slave over, and then champion their offspring, hoping that someone will sit up and take notice.

Viacom New Media had somewhat of a dying breed of a games division which they spawned off as Rabid Entertainment. With the exception of *Beavis and Butthead in Virtual Stupidity*, little successful had happened there in a long time. After a period of unsuccessful attempts to sell it off, Viacom finally closed down Rabid, leaving several projects homeless. One of the homeless you may have heard about—it is an RPG called *SepterraCore*.

The *Septerra* team was horrified, but had seen it coming. Waves of them had been laid off in batches, leaving only five key players. They continued to work hard, acquired the rights to the game from Viacom, and formed Valkyrie Studios to provide a home for their orphaned baby. Valkyrie president Cathi Court said, "They [Viacom] finally just had to boot us out of there and say, 'Look, you're on your own' and we basically set up shop in my basement for, criminy, [yes, she said, 'criminy'] four months while we were going through the publisher search." Court and her core team held status meetings over pots of chili with still-interested stragglers, re-employed and unemployed, from the original design team. They knocked on every door, watched and waited.

When the likes of id, Gathering of Developers, and even Cavedog were startups, they at least had stars with track records galore. Not so here. Only the devotion and the passion kept them going. Finally it happened. German publisher TopWare approached them and finally, *finally* they had a new space, and a budget, and most of their team back. A happy ending? We'll see when *SepterraCore* hits the shelves in the spring. "Call it gut, call it anything you want," said Court. "If it were meant to be anything less than what we're trying to make it, it would've died. It just would've died a long time ago." Progeny—gotta love 'em. ■

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Maximum PC Verdict 10

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PCWorks™ FourPointSurround™

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— PC Gamer, October 1998
PCWorks™ FourPointSurround™

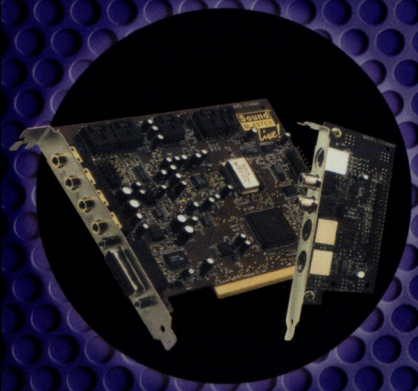
PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

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www.soundblaster.com/experience/

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PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

— PC Gamer, May 1998
3D Blaster Voodoo2



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— C/NET, February 1998
5-Star Gameworthy Review,
PC-DVD Encore Dxr™2

GAMEWORTHY c|net www.gamecenter.com

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◆ = best suited
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Physics modeling

The wonderful thing about triggers by Ben Chiu



Ubi Soft's F1 Racing Simulation is the most well-rounded racing sim on the market



It may be simple, but Codemasters' TOCA Championship Racing is a heck of a lot of fun

Whether you're spending your time flying or driving, a simulation of this act has some sort of physics modeling. Whether the physics being modeled are from our universe is irrelevant—as long as the "rules" are consistently implemented to the satisfaction of the player within the world being simulated, all is well. But what constitutes consistent modeling can be a bit deceptive. Without getting into "smoke and mirrors" modeling (maybe some other time), there seem to be some misconceptions about how and more importantly why some models just feel "phony" and when "cheating" is always cheating.

UbiSoft's *F1 Racing Simulation* is unquestionably the best all-around racing sim currently out there. It looks good, runs fast, feels close enough to what people expect to be realistic, and is chock full of the options that allow it to be approachable by both arcaders and sim heads. It also has some easy to understand examples of what can be described as "event driven" or "limit triggered" physics modeling effects—do A or cross A, and B happens. This is modeled as "cross over limit A and physics model effect B takes over." As I've outlined a before, departure modeling (stalls and subsequent modeling of spins) in most older flight sims fit this description.

In *F1 Racing Simulation,* set one wheel off the track (into a gravel trap or grass) and you instantly slow down. Although that's the design goal behind gravel traps, in UbiSoft's sim your throttle authority mysteriously diminishes as well. Obviously once you reach the event (go off the road), a different range of parameters takes over. Of course off-road modeling isn't really important to the scope of this simulation, and these were obviously design decisions. It just neatly illustrates how event driven modeling behaves.



Flaps..., gear down... pull up, pull up! Thank you for flying Grand Prix Legends

Sierra Sports' Grand Prix Legends has lapped the field with a physics engine that's a whole level above what's been done before.

At first glance, anyone who's put some thought into simulation design would deem event driven modeling as unrealistic, but the truth is all physics modeling is event driven/limit triggered. The difference between a good, believable "seamless" job (one where the modeled vehicle behaves believably, but more importantly *feels* correct) and one that feels or behaves *arcade-ishly* is directly tied to the number of variables used to arrive at the trigger "limit."

Codemasters' *TOCA Championship Racing* may not have the most sophisticated physics modeling around, but it's a heck of a lot of fun to race. If you're unfamiliar with Touring Car races, the door-to-door racing is both challenging and highly entertaining to watch or drive. Regardless, the physics modeling in this sim is basically tied to vehicle speed—if you go too fast in a turn, you spin. While this is partially correct (the faster you go, the wider your turn should become first), the mechanics of cornering quickly encompass much more than that.

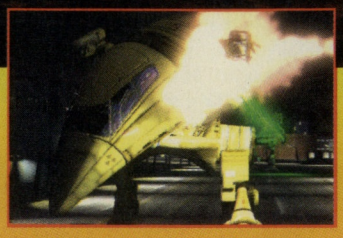
Generally, the greater number of parameters that are used to calculate triggered events or conditions, the closer you get to what's often referred to as progressive modeling. The more complex the triggering parameters, the higher the perceived modeling *fidelity*.

With that said, Sierra Sports' (Papyrus for you old-timers) *Grand Prix Legends* has lapped the field with a physics engine that's a whole level above what's been done before. Driving one of these babies requires more than just mashing the brakes until you fall just below the critical cornering speed for the particular turn you're entering. Although you may have seen effects like the nose of your car dip when you hit the brakes in other Papyrus sims, they've admitted that those effects were triggered events rather than modeled ones based on physics. But in *Grand Prix Legends* when you see your suspension compress, the amount and effect is based on many parameters being calculated. The overall effect on feel and drivability makes this the closest any racing sim has come to driving real, high-performance race cars (at least the ones I've been fortunate enough to race). The downside is that some people may not be willing to dedicate the time and effort required to master this wonderful sim, which as always is the curse of pursuing ultra-realistic sims. ■

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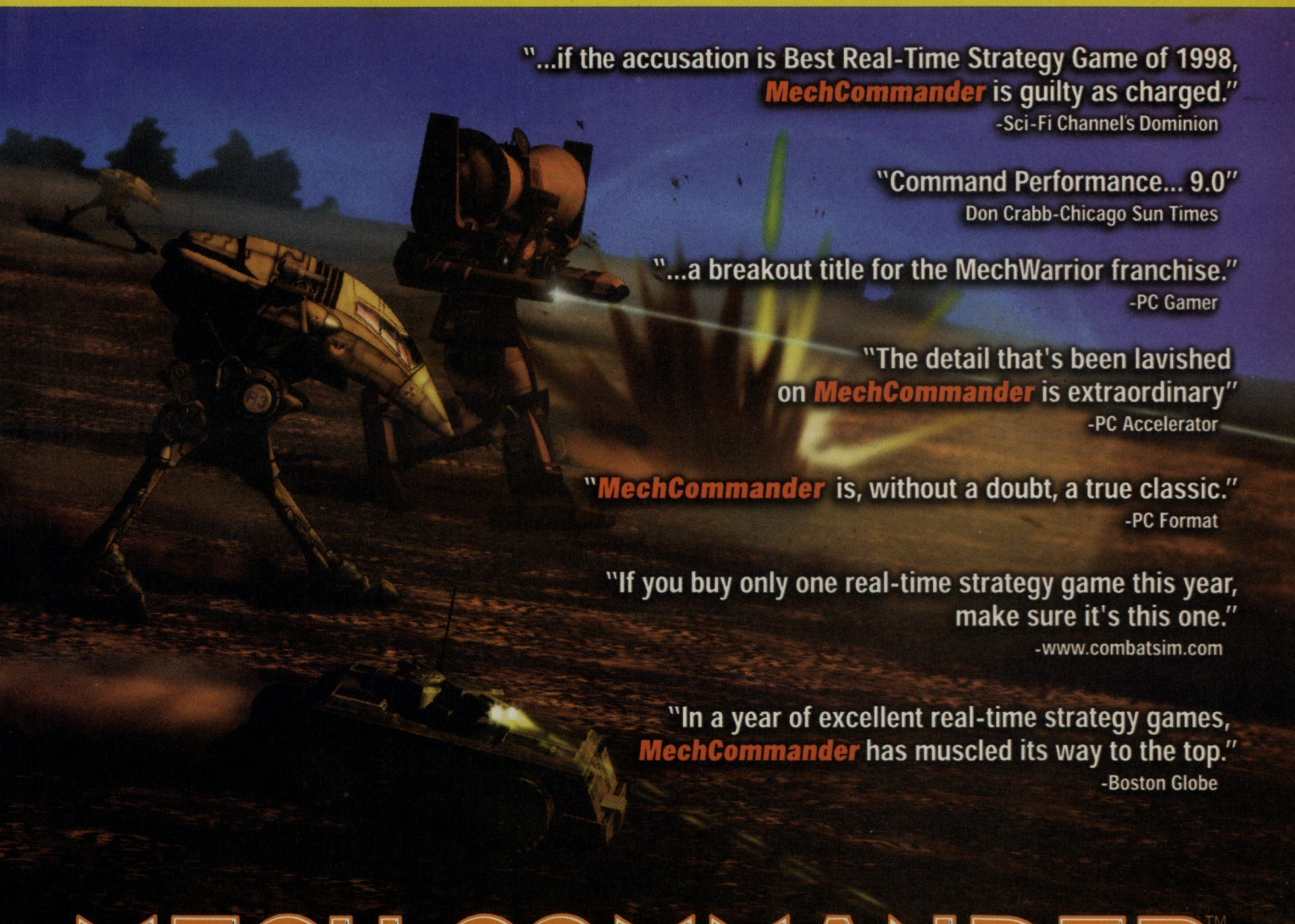
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Don Crabb-Chicago Sun Times

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CG-CDROM

NO.98 DEMOS / KEYBOARD CONROLS / REQUIREMENTS / BY JOEL HULSEY

Shogo: Mobile Armor Division



Never say die

REQUIREMENTS

Monolith Productions
www.shogo-mad.com
Tech Support:
425-739-1698
Windows 95, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB RAM

Shogo: Mobile Armor Division is a first-person action shooting game where the object is simply to survive. The game has a very strong Japanese anime influence. With full speech briefings during gameplay, 3D acceleration, multiplayer support in the full version, multiple winning paths and incredible sound effects, *Shogo* has something for every action game fan.

The demo offers two single player missions, but no multiplayer action. Also, the demo offers three distinct weapons, but the full game offers 20 different weapons in two separate weapon arsenals (on foot and in the mech). Also, the full game has 35 levels plus one bonus hidden level. Monolith has also promised a multiplayer matching server for fragging your best friends. ■


You're either a giant robot or a giant bug

Populous: The Beginning

REQUIREMENTS

Bullfrog Productions
www.populous.net
Tech Support:
650-572-2787
Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM

Populous: The Beginning continues the legacy of one of the most storied computer games of all time. In the original *Populous*, the player played the role of a god and did with his subjects as he or she saw fit In the sequel, you must work up to become a god. You start off very small with only a few followers, but of course you have grand ideas of just how you'd run this lousy world if only given the chance.


Where warriors come from

The demo offers three single-player maps and one multiplayer map to enjoy. The full game will have over 25 levels and multiplayer support for up to eight players. There is even a rolling demo to give you a good idea of what to do. ■


Shaman, your main man

Age of Empires: Rise of Rome



A well-designed empire



This city has excellent defenses

Age of Empires: Rise of Rome is the expansion pack for the original *Age of Empires*. Featuring new civilizations, weapons, tools and characters, *Rise of Rome* adds more of what gamers loved in the original. New to the game are the Romans (of course), Carthaginians, Palmyrans and Macedonians. Also new are improved pathfinding routines, the ability to queue units, and improved graphics.

In the demo, you can play as the Carthaginians. There are three solo missions available as well as multiplayer support for modem, serial, TCP/IP, Mplayer and MSN Gaming Zone. Support for up to four players in a single scenario is included, so log on and advance your civilization. ■

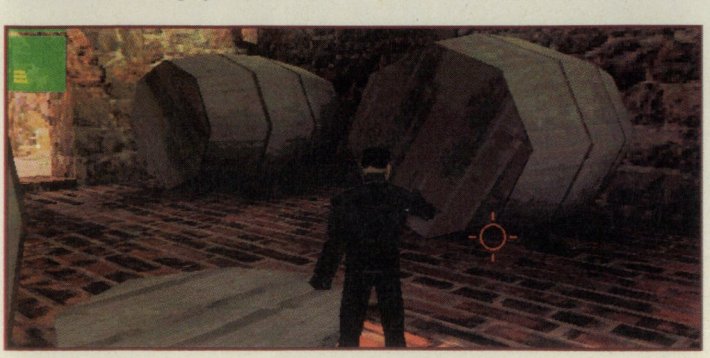
REQUIREMENTS

Microsoft
www.microsoft.com/games/
Tech Support:
425-637-9308
Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, Mouse
Multiplayer: 1-4 players via modem, serial, TCP/IP, Mplayer, MSN Gaming Zone

Vigilance



An excellent vantage point



Wonder if there's beer in there?

REQUIREMENTS

SegaSoft
www.segasoft.com
Tech Support:
888-SEGASOFT
Windows 95, 166mhz Pentium of higher, 32MB RAM
Multiplayer: 1-4 players over LAN or HEAT.net

Vigilance is a 3D third-person action game where the player has a choice of a male or female character (wonder what most guys will pick?). The demo picks up with the gamer having to shoot his/her way out of a terrorist camp. Why pick on the poor terrorists? Because you are a member of SION, the world's most elite anti-terrorist organization known to man.

The demo gives you both single and multiplayer capabilities. Multiplayer is through either LAN or HEAT.net. The full game also offers a training center that will take you by the hand and lead you through the game's interface and weapons. ■

CGCD-ROM INSTALLATION

Windows 95
Place the CD disc in your CD-ROM drive. The disc will autoplay. If it fails to do so, right click on your CD-ROM icon (located in "My Computer") and select OPEN. Double-click the "Install" icon.

Windows 3.1
Place the CD in your CD-ROM drive and choose File, Run from the Program Manager. Type "D:\INSTALL," where D: is the letter of your CD-ROM drive, and press ENTER. Follow the instructions on screen. After installation is complete, double-click the created icon to start.

Still having problems? Send a description of the problem along with your system configuration to cgcdtech@cdmag.com, or mail a letter with the same information to the address below. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original CD to:

Computer Games
63 Millet St.
Richmond, VT 05477
ATTN: CD replacement

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PC CD ROM

Melbourne House



Madden Football 99

Genre: Football

EA Sports • www.easports.com
Tech Support: 512-434-4357
Windows 95, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



Future Cop: LAPD

Genre: Third person robot action

Electronic Arts • www.ea.com
Tech Suppport: 512-434-4357
Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



Oddworld: Abe's Exodus

Genre: 2D sidescrolling action/adventure

GT Interactive • www.gtgames.com
Tech Support: 888-226-5656
Windows 95, 120MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



Recoil

Genre: 3D tank action

Electronic Arts • www.ea.com
Tech Spport: 512-434-4357
Windows 95, 133mhz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer: 4-player over TCP/IP, IPX, modem and serial

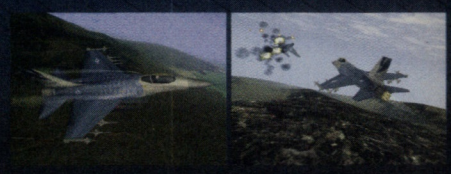
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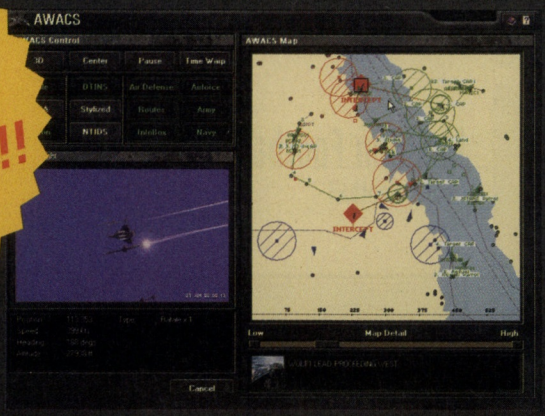


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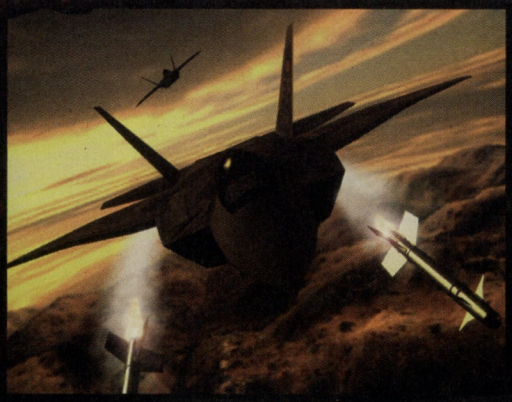
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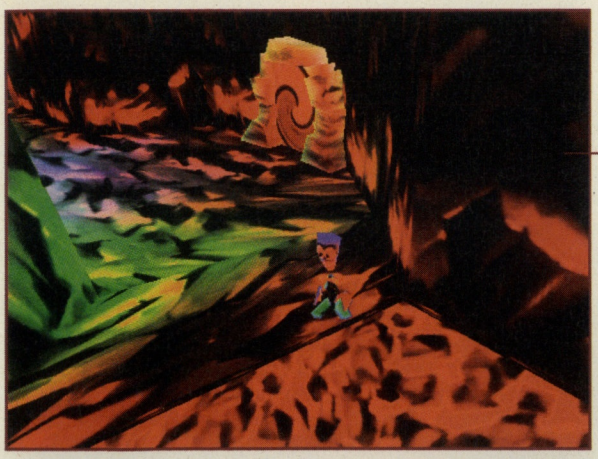
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Tonic Trouble

Genre: Third-person 3D action

Ubi Soft • www.ubisoft.com
Tech Support: 514-490-0887
Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



Speed Busters

Genre: Arcade Racing

Ubi Soft • www.ubisoft.com
Tech Support: 514-490-0887
Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



Top Gun: Hornet's Nest

Genre: 3D action combat

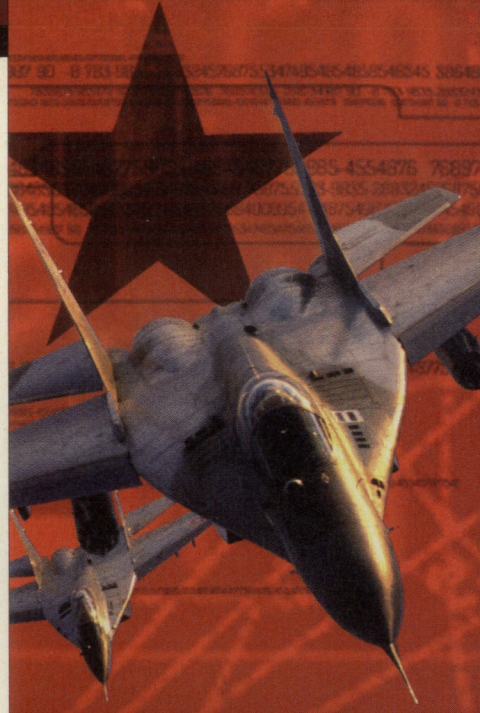
MicroProse • www.microprose.com
Tech Support: 510-522-1164
Windows 95, 166mhz Pentium or higher, 32MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



NHL 99

Genre: Hockey

EA Sports • www.easports.com
Tech Support: 650-572-2787
Windows 95, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB RAM
Multiplayer: None



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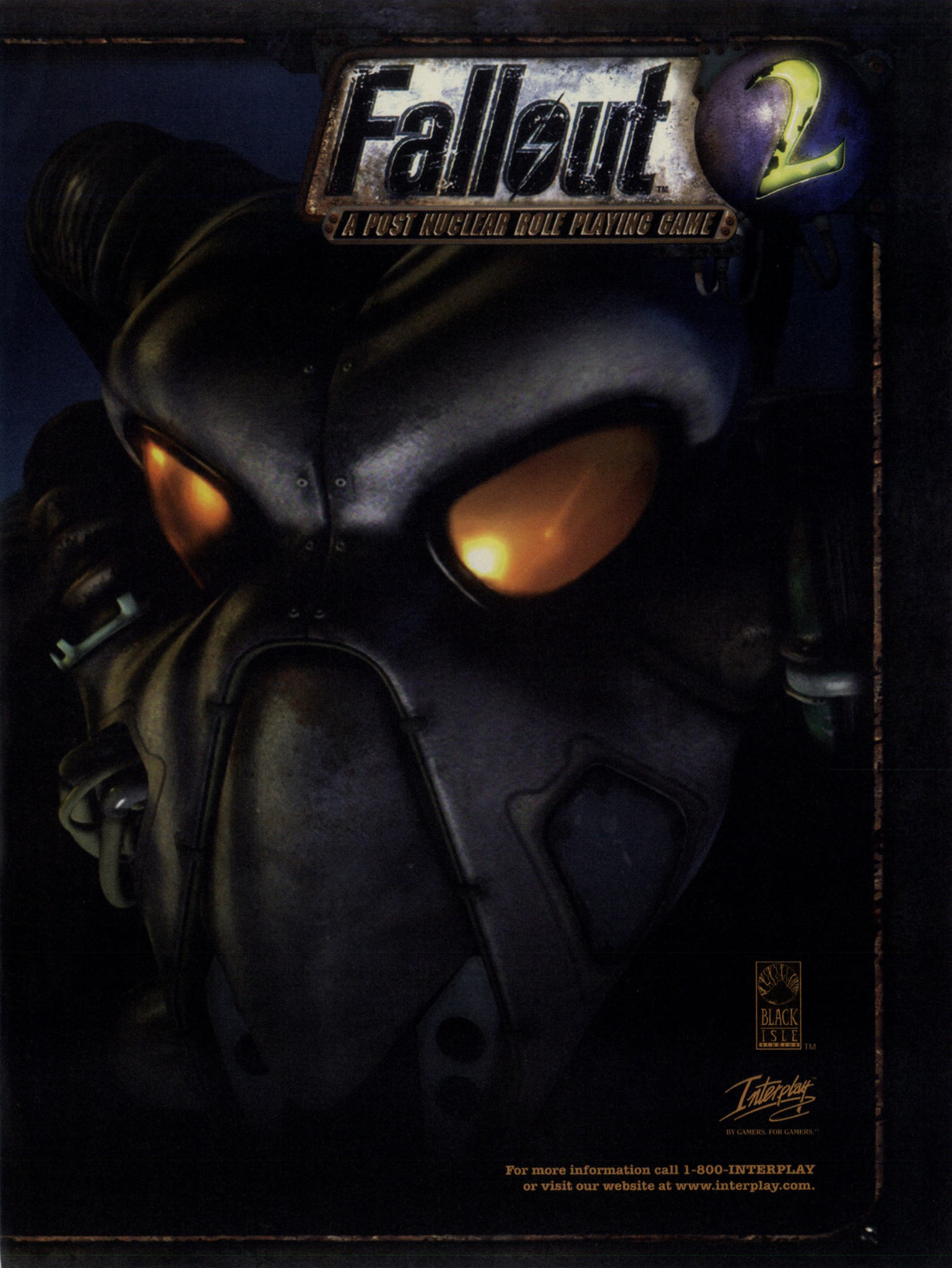


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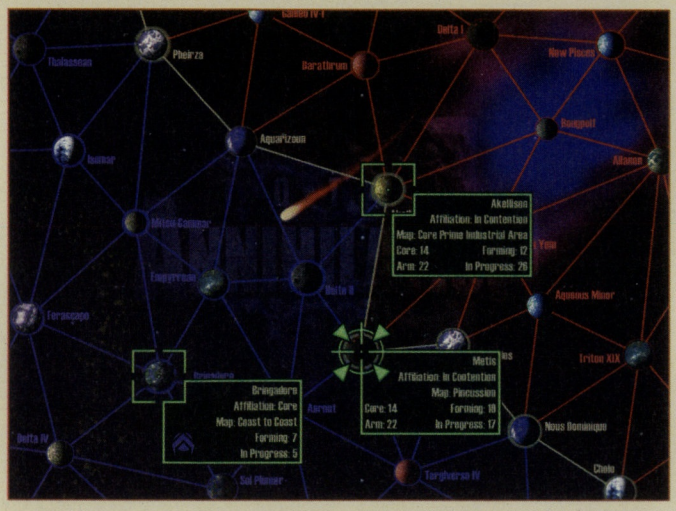
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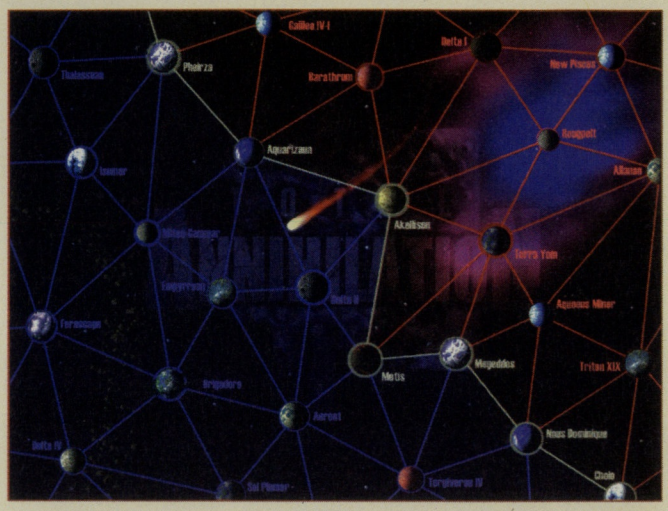
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[left to right] **The battleground for your next struggle has been selected; The Galactic Wars map in all of its glory, and...**

Throwing gamers a bone

CaveDog continues the march toward free online gaming



CAVEDOG ENTERTAINMENT, THE CREATOR of *Total Annihilation*, has taken their next step towards world domination and announced their own free online gaming service. Dubbed Boneyards, the service is scheduled to go beta in November and live by the time you're reading this. It offers support and enhancement for Cavedog's *Total Annihilation* line of games. Gamers will have to download an upgrade for their existing copies of *Total Annihilation* (from www.cavedog.com), but there will be no charge for playing games on Boneyards. Cavedog anticipates offering Boneyard support for future Cavedog titles *Total Annihilation: Kingdoms*, *Amen: The Awakening*, *Elysium*, and *Good & Evil*.

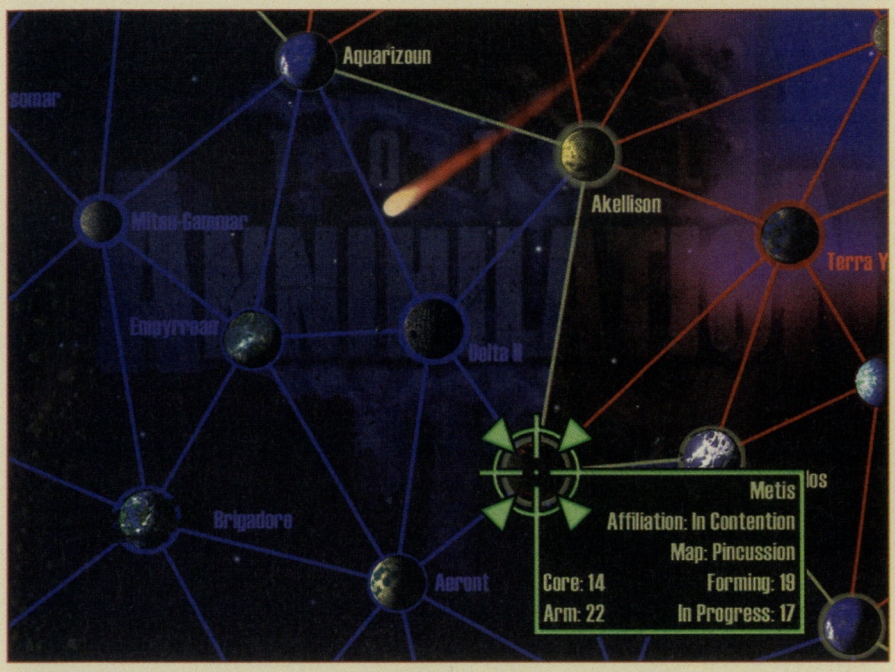
What makes Boneyards unique, and what will set it apart from the other services supporting Cavedog games, is not its matchmaking abilities (something numerous online services offer), but rather the enhancements it offers for the multiplayer gaming experience. As Scott Wallin, Senior Director of Online Games at Cavedog puts it, "As avid gamers ourselves, we assess the typical online experience of the other services, but our focus has been internal to the needs of our games and of our gaming audience."

"We covered a lot of new territory and tried some new things, such as free downloadable units and 3D architecture, when we released *Total Annihilation* last year," says Ron Gilbert, co-founder of Cavedog. "Boneyards is just a natural extension of that effort to provide players more cool stuff."

Chief among these enhancements is *Galactic Wars*, a persistent, ongoing campaign setting for *Total Annihilation*. Here, players will choose sides (Arm or Core) and wage war across star systems of 50 to 70 interconnected worlds. Planets in contention will be the sites of mulitplayer battles between the Arm and the Core, and the day's total victories and defeats for each side will determine the fate of those worlds. As each side advances and retreats across a system, worlds will change hands, fall into contention, or resist attack as the fortunes of the players dictate. The goal, of course, is to take the other side's home world while preserving one's own.

Battles in *Galactic Wars* will be fought out using the original *Total Annihilation* game. Players can log into Boneyards from within the game, and hook into a new front end to join sides, find opponents, chat, and check the status of the war. "Boneyards, and Galactic Wars in particular, will add an entirely new level of strategic play to *Total Annihilation*," says Wallin. "Besides, it's not everyday that you can capture a planet, save the universe, and mock your friends all in one day." Cavedog plans to update results every morning at 1AM PST, so players can check up on the progress (or lack thereof) of the war effort.

Players will begin as Privates, and have the chance to advance to Supreme Commander. Promotions will depend on win/loss rations, efficiency, and other factors. Game maps will come from all three versions of *Total Annihilation* (the original plus the two add-ons, *Core Contingency* and *Battle Tactics*), and some planets may have specific rules and restrictions. Players who don't wish to be part of the grand war effort may, of course, simply fight on any world, without affecting the course of the overall struggle. During a campaign, the status of each world to be fought



... the zoomed-in version of the Galactic Wars map

What makes Boneyards unique, and what will set it apart from the other services supporting Cavedog games, is not its matchmaking abilities (something numerous online services offer), but rather the enhancements it offers for the multiplayer gaming experience.

over will be available for examination. Players can check up on each potential battleground, and scout for special rules, unique terrain, or other factors that might influence the coming battle.

As for other games, Cavedog has big plans for them as well. "We are developing a number of technologies to support all of our games," a company spokesperson notes. "We will not force a game onto a service that is not right for it. Instead, we will build a service that is right for the game." This should include customized interfaces, content, and themes. " According to Wallin, "The key focus of Boneyards is in maintaining the completely immersive gaming experience at all times, [with gamers] never having to leave the game to connect together."

Part of that focus will be on reducing cheating and other forms of inappropriate behavior. "We are addressing cheating on a number of different levels," says Wallin. "We've already dealt with the issue of cheating [in *Total Annihilation*] in the PGL tournaments for TEN, and have gained a wealth of knowledge from that experience. Obviously, we won't document our procedures, but suffice it to say we are aware of the issues and what needs to be done to address them."

Cavedog is going where several other game companies have gone before, notably Blizzard. Blizzard wasn't the first to offer players free online gaming, but they set the standards for what a free, company-sponsored online service should be. Earlier online support was largely of the no-frills, here's-a-server-and-that's-it variety. With Battle.net, though, Blizzard offered much more. Full chat support. Latency indicators. Online tech support. Most importantly, Battle.net offered gazillions of simultaneous games to choose from. Sure, they were all *Diablo*, but at least there were oodles of *Diablo* games ongoing at any given time.

Since late 1996, when Battle.net debuted, other companies have gotten into the act. Westwood set up its own service to handle games like *Command & Conquer* and *Sole Survivor*. Bungie has Bungie.net, for its award-winning *Myth* and soon *Myth II*. NovaLogic supports its sims and action titles via NovaWorld, and Blizzard's own service has added *StarCraft* to the mix, and is soon to add a new version of *WarCraft II*. Cavedog's Boneyards service seems to be part of a trend, away from pay-for-play services supporting a wide variety of games from many companies and towards "company store" services that support a small set of games, but support them very well.

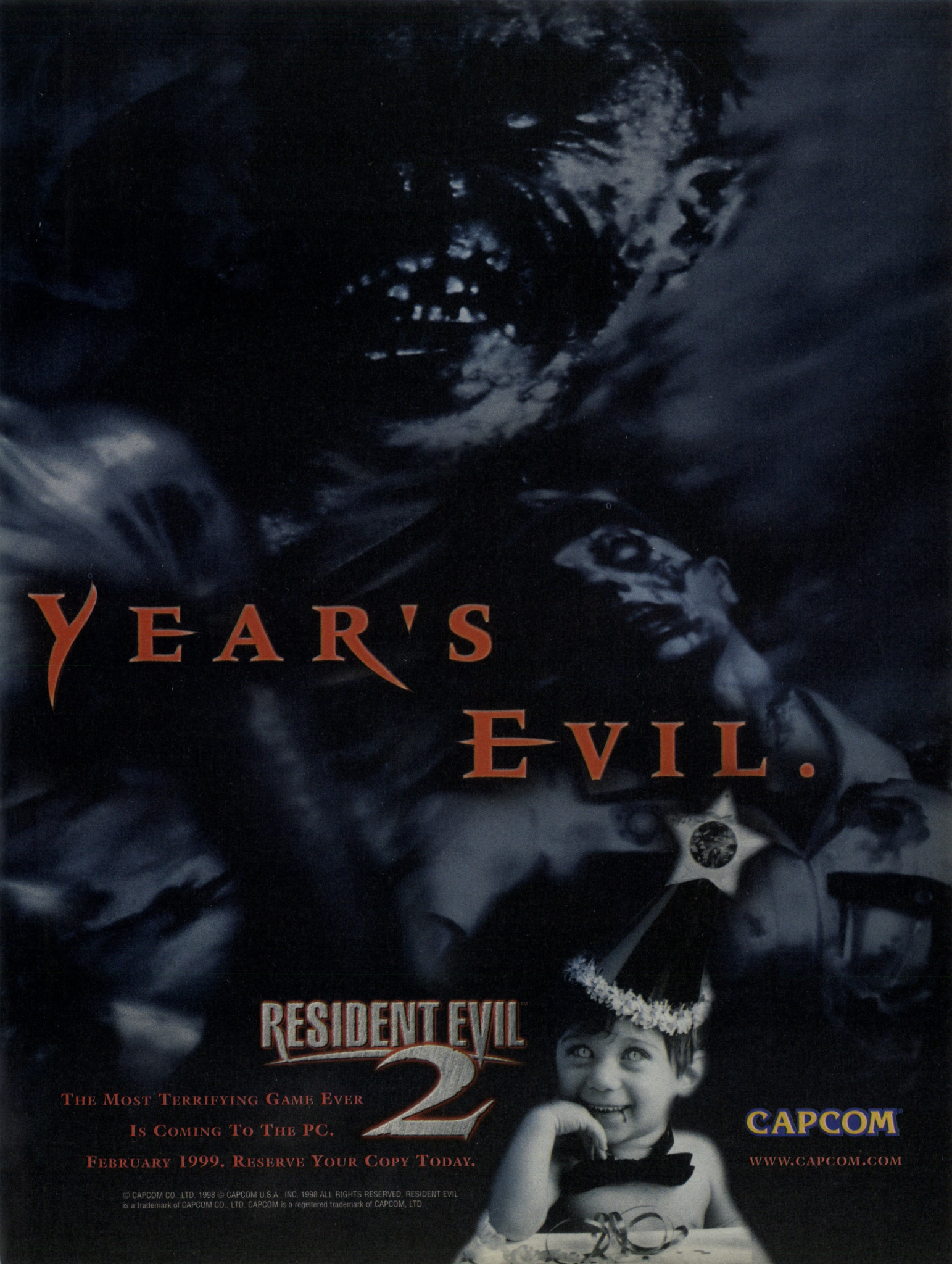
Finances are always a concern with a free service. Like the other company services, Boneyards will be advertiser-supported. Says Wallin, "It's either the advertisers, or multiplayer gamers that will have to pay the bills for online gaming, so we've chosen the advertisers!" He adds, "I think that pay per play will be the hardest sell, and obviously free is a good thing for players. There have been subscription based games for a long time, that model is starting to catch on."

Wallin goes on to say that playing games online can have therapeutic effect. "The secret of eternal youth is to continue to play Cavedog titles indefinitely, and to purchase additional copies for friends and loved ones!" Regardless of the truth of *that* statement, gamers will get a chance to render their own verdict on Boneyards over the coming months. *–Robert Mayer*

Cleaner, slicker, more interesting are the watchwords for Boneyards



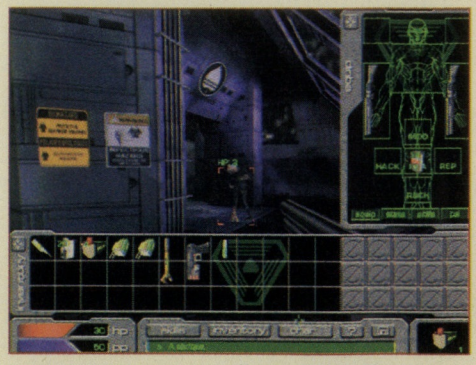

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System Shock 2

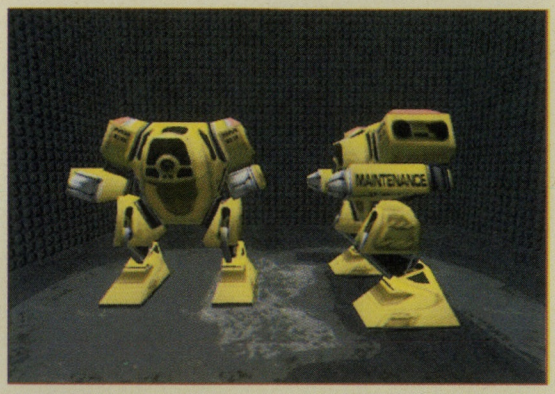
One of the best 3D games finally returns



An early look at the new interface. Some of it should look familiar to fans of the original...

FIRST LOOK CONSIDERED BY MANY to be one of the best games of all time, the original System Shock should have been the game that heralded a new era in hybrid gaming. It mixed first-person action with role-playing and adventure like no other 3D game had previously (or, for that matter, has since). However, it has this (undeserved) reputation for being something of a failure, as it didn't change the world or take the marketplace by storm (sources say it sold in the hundreds of thousands, but people were looking for Doom-like numbers).

The creators of the game, Looking Glass Studios, are finally revisiting the game with *System Shock 2*. Utilizing the 3D technology developed for *Thief: The Dark Project*, it will require a 3D accelerator, support 16-bit color graphics, and will sport the usual complement of colored lighting, translucent objects, particle effects, yadda yadda yadda.



The maintenance robots now look slightly more substantial

The plans call for it to feature the same attention to detail and hybrid play of the original, with (obviously) better visuals and multiplayer play. According to the early information Looking Glass is leaking, they plan on expanding the role-playing aspects of the original, with detailed character generation, full stats, inventory, user-modifiable weapons and a detailed story.

The game will include new psionic powers, such as Cyber-Psi, Cryrokinesis, and Force Wall. There will be less of a cyberspace component than the original, but you'll still need to hack various systems in order to gain access to doors and such (in other words, solve puzzles). Cooperative multiplayer play will allow for four people to take on Shodan in its (her?) new incarnation, whatever that may be.

We'll certainly have more information on this game as it gets closer to its scheduled release date, which currently sits in late 1999. *–Steve Bauman*

System Shock 2 • Looking Glass Studios
Windows 95, 98

BRIEFS: Sirtech shuts its doors—One of the oldest software publishers has shut its doors as a publisher. Sirtech, creators of the ***Wizardry*** series and ***Jagged Alliance***, has closed its Ogdensburg, NY business offices and laid off the staff. According to Robert Sirotek, Vice President of Sir-tech, the closure relates only to the publishing division of Sirtech, not to the development arm. Work continues on ***Jagged Alliance 2*** and ***Wizardry 8*** (both of which are due in 1999), and North American publishers will for those two titles will be announced as soon as the contracts are signed... **Heroes III in 1999**—John Adams, president of 3DO, confirmed that the release date for ***Heroes of Might and Magic III*** has slipped to February 1999.

Rites of War

Warhammer General

FIRST LOOK ON THE ONE HAND you've got a successful family of games—call them the *General* games, of which *Panzer General* and *Panzer General II* are co-patriarchs. On the other hand, you've got a *Warhammer* license—wildly popular with the sci-fi/fantasy miniatures crowd, the computer games have, as of this writing (*Chaos Gate* hasn't shipped yet), gotten a mixed reception. What to do? Combine them, you say? What a great idea—must be why SSI is doing that in their upcoming *Rites of War*, the third and (surprisingly enough) last game to use the *Panzer General II* engine.



A day at the beach, Warhammer 40K-style

In the campaign game you play the Eldar, fighting bio-engineered Tyranid invaders... unless, of course, you'd rather play the Tyranid and Imperial forces in some of the single and multiplayer scenarios. The campaign lasts some 24 missions, and SSI is promising a "tightly crafted storyline, detailed atmosphere, and varied victory conditions" (take note of that varied victory conditions part—their last *General* game, *People's General*, had purely linear campaigns).



Guess those Tyranids aren't making snow angels, huh?

SSI hasn't talked about the units that will be represented in the game (short of what's shown in the screenshots—quiz next week), but they are promising more than 70, all to be 3D rendered and animated. Like in previous games using the engine, you'll be able to use "glory points" (read: prestige points) to build up your forces, choosing units, "wargear," and "warrior skills" (these last two sound suspiciously like *People's General*'s attachments and leader abilities). Also as in earlier games, grabbing a certain objective ("planetary structure") may net you extra units, "relics," or wargear.

The game'll sport cooperative or head-to-head multiplayer, and you'll be able to create your own scenarios (but not maps—you'll notice that the map graphics are even more detailed—or at least colorful—than those in previous *General* games). Gameplay, though, should be similar enough to earlier games that anyone familiar with them should be able to jump right on in. *–Scott Udell*

Warhammer 40,000: Rites of War • SSI
Windows 95/98

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Monaco Grand Prix Racing Simulation 2

UbiSoft's latest game races to completion

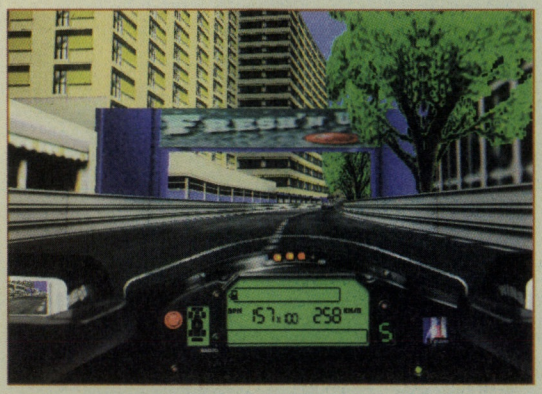
FIRST LOOK WITH *SPEED BUSTERS* and *SCARS* coming out this holiday season, UbiSoft is quickly becoming known for its serious (or not so serious) race games. Next on their release schedule is *Monaco Grand Prix Racing Simulation 2* (whew), the sequel to the superb *F1 Racing Simulation*, which is one of the best racing games in recent memory. The sequel, while no longer an official F1 game, still includes 17 tracks and 11 teams with unique cars. New regulations have been added, including blue, yellow, and black flags; the "107 percent rule" for qualifying; and an option to select which brand of treaded tire you'd prefer to use.

The game is still quite techno-savvy, supporting 3D accelerators (Direct3D and Glide), force feedback, and 3D sound. There's the usual accelerated eye-candy present, including crowd favorites smoke and lighting effects, real-time weather, and the legendary lens flare. Overall, the game is as graphically stunning as the previous version, with an almost hyper-realistic look that humbles the competition.

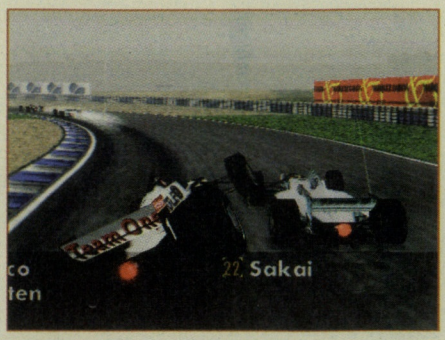
The game features multiple modes of play, including single races, full seasons and a new single-track vintage racing mode (1950s-era cars). Extensive multiplayer support, including Internet play via UbiSoft's free matchmaking service, is included. A future service on the site, which may be completed in time for the US release of the game (we have a final European version of the game), will track driver rankings from throughout the world.

While it still may not be as sophisticated a simulation as Sierra Sports' *Grand Prix Legends* [see page **XX**], *Monaco Grand Prix Racing Simulation 2* is a feature-rich product that offers plenty of options for fans of hardcore simulations and arcade action. It should be on shelves in early 1999. *–Steve Bauman*

Monaco Grand Prix Racing Simulation 2
UbiSoft • Windows 95, 98



Ripping down the streets of Monaco



Oops, got a little bit too close

Vulcan furious—Interplay has placed the adventure game ***Star Trek: The Secret of Vulcan Fury*** on "hiatus," AKA "canceled"... **Crack closes**—Independent developer Crack Dot Com has shut it doors. The creators of ***Abuse*** and the upcoming ***Golgotha*** ran out of money. They've released all of the source code, art and music resources for *Golgotha* to the public domain. It's available at **www.crack.com**... **PC gets Evil**—***Resident Evil 2***, that is. **Capcom** will be brining the hit **PlayStation** game to the PC. The original sold poorly as a PC game. Good luck, Capcom... ■



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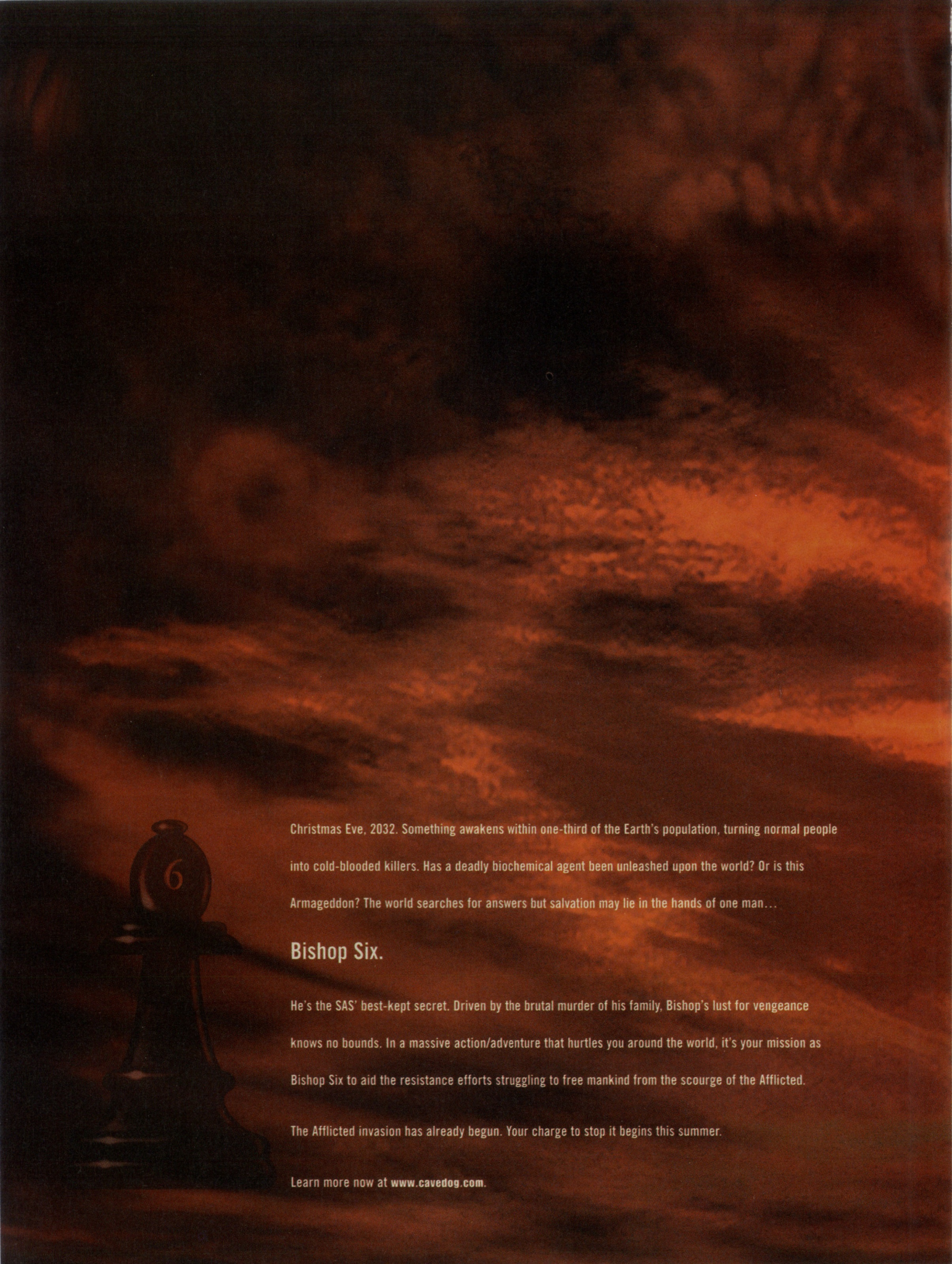


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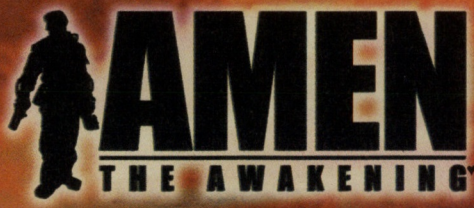
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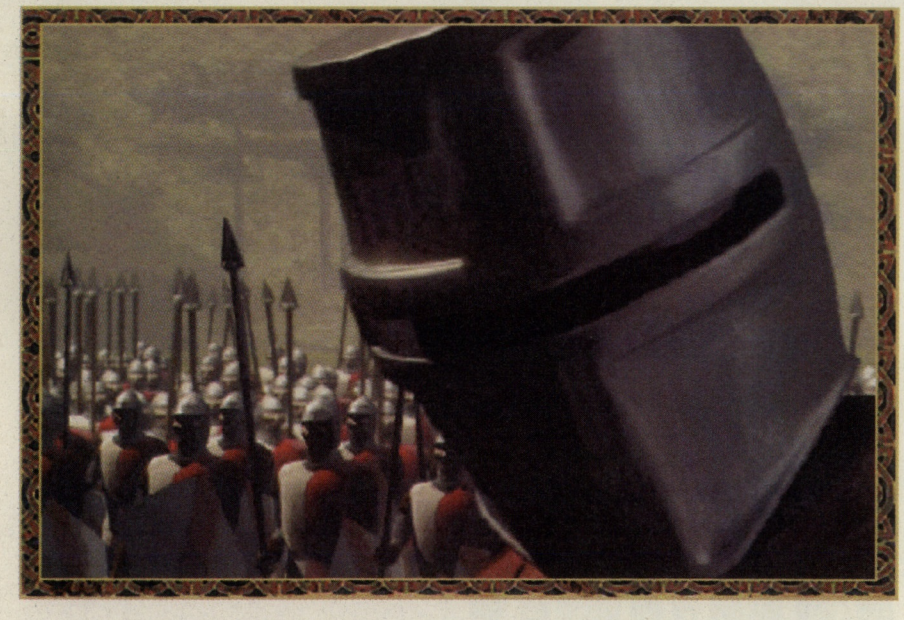
Braveheart • Eidos • Windows 95/98

The Return of the Epic

Turn-based depth meets real-time breadth

By Scott Udell

Computer strategy gaming has been going through what the ivory tower-types might refer to as a "paradigm shift." Normal folks might call it upheaval, confusion, and change. Fans of the "old style" games—deep, turn-based, thought-provoking, time-consuming—have looked on in dismay as the real-time craze has run roughshod over their favorite form of gaming. Fans of the "new style" games—challenging, real-time, time-consuming—have looked on in dismay as the real-time craze with publishers has left them with a few very notable games and many, many lesser-quality "me too" games. Everyone wonders where strategy gaming is headed, hoping it's in new and interesting directions but fearing it's turning into a simplistic, mass-market morass with few stand-out games.



What could be the answer? Almost everyone remembers the depth and addictiveness of games like *Civilization*, *Empire*, *Railroad Tycoon*, and *Warlords*, games with epic scope that kept us glued to our computers for months or more. And everyone knows about the different kind of addictiveness we get in games like *Command & Conquer*, *Warcraft II*, *Total Annihilation*, and *Myth*, games that may not have the "epic" feel but titles that definitely have a much more personal, and equally intense, involvement. To a large extent fans divide themselves into camps, turn-based versus real-time; the near (or outright) animosity that results only helps feed that sense of upheaval and confusion. What, though, would happen if someone brought together the styles, merging an in-depth empire building game with a broad-scope tactical battle game? The team at Scotland-based Red Lemon Studios, along with Eidos Interactive, are trying to do just that in their upcoming game *Braveheart*.

The epic scope

If you're looking to choose a topic with an epic scope the public will recognize, you can't do much better than 13th Century Scotland as depicted in the movie *Braveheart*. The game was originally titled *Tartan Army* and was well into development when Eidos secured the *Braveheart* license, which is a good thing—they developed the game on its own merit instead of starting with a movie tie-in and building a game around it. This doesn't mean you won't see evidence of the movie in the game; Eric Adams, Eidos' associate producer on the game, tells us that an as-yet-unannounced actor from the movie will provide some of the voiceovers, film clips will appear throughout the game, and that characters from the movie will be "visually and aurally" represented. (Director/Star Mel Gibson isn't currently personally involved, but Adams hopes that once he sees the game-in-progress he'll change his mind.) This, however, is just a bit of movie tie-in seasoning to the game's meat and not, thankfully, the other way around. While the movie focused largely upon the exploits, historic or mythic, of Gibson's character William Wallace (the "Hero of Scotland"), you don't necessarily play him in the game; rather, he is one of a great cast of characters you'll either have under your control or at your throat. Choose Clan Wallace and William will be one of your primary leaders. However, his death (no matter how difficult it is to kill him) doesn't mean the end of the game—woe unto you, though, if you *do* get him killed, as your job as leader of Clan Wallace will be much more challenging.

If you're playing one of the campaigns you'll first encounter what Adams calls the strategic empire building game. In many ways reminiscent of the old Koei games, it runs in real-time, or more accurately continuous-time, with various options to speed the game along (the game covers years).

In the full game you control one of the sixteen major clans from the period, although you'll be able to interact with over 200 clans in total; depending on the campaign you chose you'll either be working to conquer and unite Scotland and claim the Scottish throne or start later in the process, claiming the throne and then taking on and conquering England. Each clan will have its own goals and leaders with their own personalities; you'll have to take all these facets into account in your climb to

...almost everything you could expect, or want, in a strategic-level game is here: resource management, politics, espionage, assassination, military maneuvering, and more...

power. Don't expect your gaming "history" to give you an advantage in dealing with these clans; according to Adams, "A major replayability bonus is that every time you start a new game, other clans' relationship with your clan (friend, foe, or neutral) will randomly change."

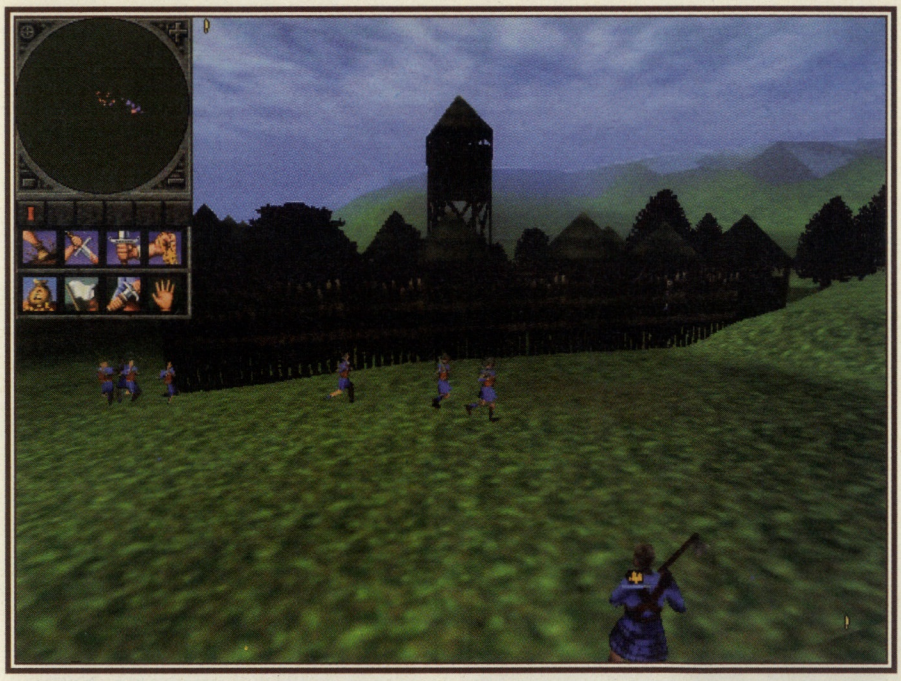
Your strategic stage will be a map, built from decidedly non-13th century satellite data, of the British Isles; the map is based on a grid with data points down to 50 meters, then is further enhanced fractally to 50x50 cm polygons, resulting in a map that would be some 650 billion polygons for terrain alone (if displayed all at once). Places on the map are historic, and Adams says they'll be including hundreds of towns and villages in addition to the key keeps and castles.

It seems like almost *everything* you could expect, or want, in a strategic-level game is here: resource management, politics, espionage, assassination, military maneuvering, and more. The period was brutal, and the game reflects this; for example, you may get a messenger from another clan asking you to join with them to attack yet another clan; your choices are to accept the offer, reject it ... or to kill the messenger. No matter what, you can expect repercussions.

Detail is the word that jumps to mind for this part of the game—you get to involve yourself in every little part of your empire building if you so choose. As your empire grows, so too will your duties; if they get to be too much, however, you can let the computer take over as much (or as little) of the micromanagement as you want. Watch over the growth of your villages and towns (visually represented in the 3D world), the expansion of which will be spurred or limited by your actions. Want to get a feel for what's going on? Drop into 3D mode and see for yourself; if it's a village after a raid you may see some grim sights indeed. Don't think that once you've brought a clan into your empire that's it—certain clans or leaders may turn coat and betray you.

The breadth of tactical battle

As if a full empire-building strategic game isn't enough, you'll also be presented with a complete real-time tactical battle game (you can, however, play just the strategic game if you want, opting to let the computer fight your battles for you). No "Clone & Conquer" this, it is somewhat more akin to *Myth* in appearance



Defensive structures can range from the stereotypical stone castle down to these more common wooden stockades



The vistas in the game are incredible



Storm the castle!



The game sports multiple leaders, each with a number of statistics and loyalties you've got to take into account



The game will feature 20 different unit types, including cavalry and siege weapons



Men in skirts: kilts offer unrestricted freedom of motion



The 3D mode supports views, including a third-person perspective



A rendered Mel Gibson playing William Wallace, the "Hero of Scotland"

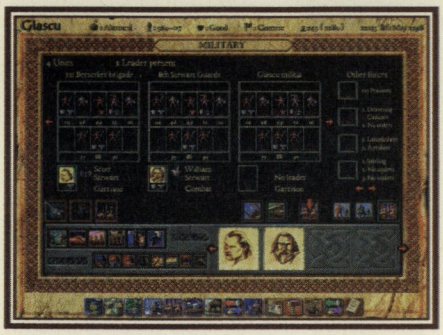
... even if you want to admire the scenery you'll probably find it difficult to ignore the hundreds of men fighting to the death all around you...



In the days before technology, messengers were the only means of communication—no instantaneous negotiating here, and messengers can be killed



Tactical battles aren't everything: the successful leader will need to learn to maneuver his or her troops strategically as well



As the game advances, forces under your control will increase

but with much more breadth of gameplay. For one thing, battles in the campaigns aren't fixed, pre-scripted affairs, but instead occur when and where the forces—forces you and your enemies are maneuvering strategically—meet up. Recall those 650 billion terrain polygons? Now you know the reason: battles could, theoretically, occur anywhere in Scotland, England, or maybe even Wales. "On to London!" could be your battle cry.

If you just want a quick taste of tactical battle without playing the strategic game, Red Lemon will be happy to oblige; Adams says they plan both "quick combat and historic battle modes." In quick combat you can set a number of parameters: locale, sides involved, force sizes, unit types, even the type of battle (feel like a siege today?). Currently six large historical battles are planned, and Adams says several pre-built hypothetical battles are under consideration.

When you drop down into the 3D tactical mode be prepared for a shock—the vistas in the game are huge. "A typical 3D scene," says Adams, "could contain 32 square kilometers of landscape, 100 characters, 500 trees/bushes, 20 buildings and a castle—in excess of 50,000 polygons." And this is what you might glimpse: it doesn't include what's not in your field of view. What Adams refers to as "progressive mesh refinement on the landscape" aids the long views; assuming you get a clear day, your view may reach out some 16 kilometers. Of course, that is assuming a clear day *exists* here—we are talking about Scotland, after all, where the weather can be harsh. The game takes into account the full range of environmental effects: real-time floods and storms, seasonal changes, time of day, and so forth. Changes are done subtly too, when subtlety is called for—no abrupt switches into darkness, for example, just a gradual shift that can catch you quite unaware.

Of course, even if you want to admire the scenery you'll probably find it difficult to ignore the hundreds of men fighting to the death all around you, but then those men are the reason you're here. Battles can be very small and personal, the actions of a smaller raiding or (maybe) assassination party, or epic-large, with hundreds of fighters (Adams says theoretically up to 3000) duking it out at one time. Armies can be composed of up to 20 different troop types including heavy cavalry and siege equipment, displayed via 3D models with multiple levels of detail (up to 700 polygons on each model).

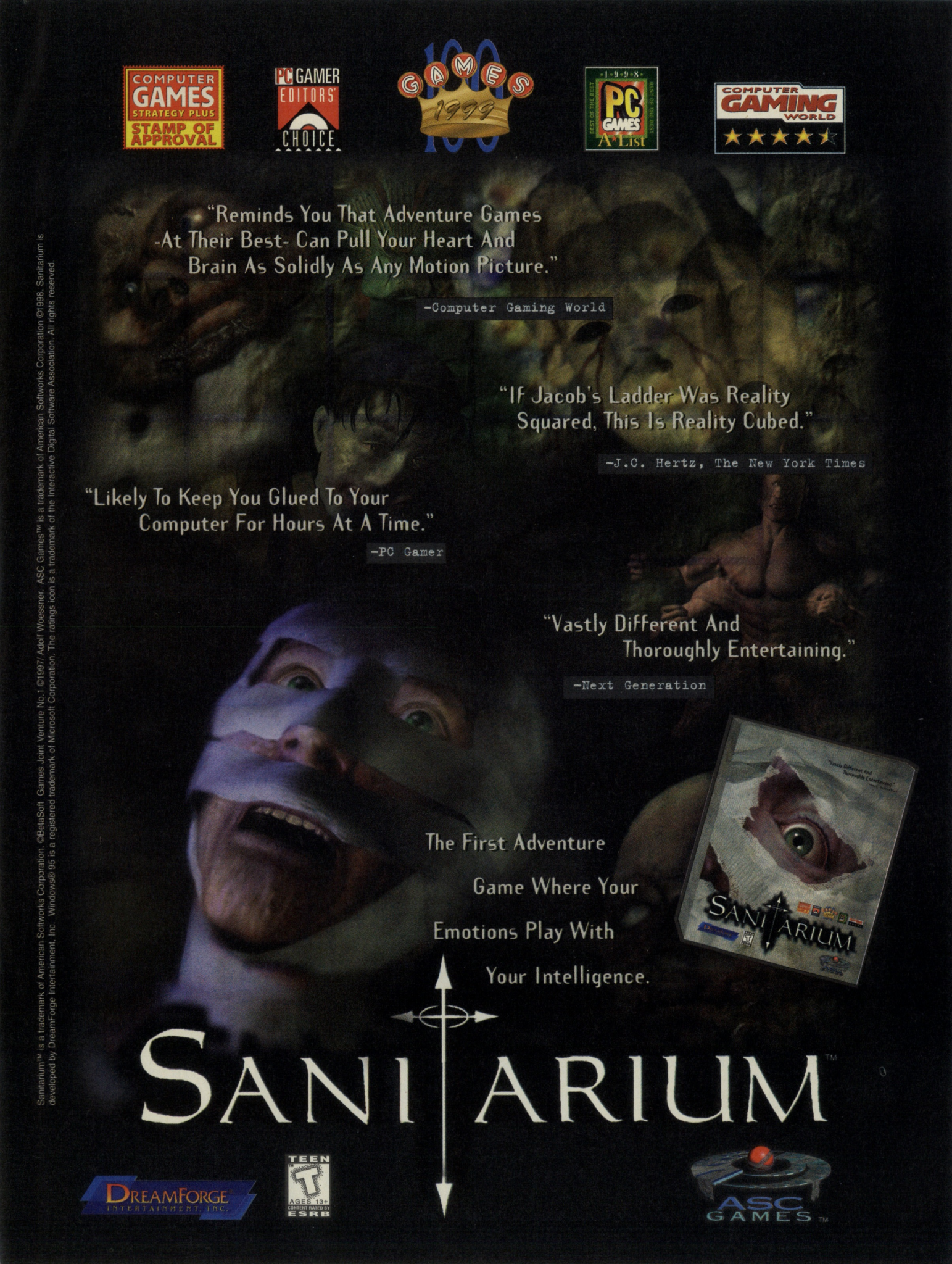
While the popular perception of these battles is hordes of screaming Scotsmen in kilts descending pell-mell upon hapless clutches of Englishmen, you're not likely to get gameplay like that unless you mismanage your forces. Instead, to do well you'll want to use the military formations available to you, and maneuver them according to realistic tactics—no Celt Rush here, unless it's an accurately timed and perfectly executed one. Of course a military force is nothing without leadership (something too-often ignored in RTS games), but *Braveheart* will include some 60 individual commanders, each with ten leadership statistics. Depending on how you've handled things at the strategic level, you may be encountering some of these leaders from the wrong side of the battlefield—better hope it's not the stronger leaders.

And castles! Mustn't forget the castles. Remember the siege equipment? You'll need it to crack open the refuges of a reviled enemy. "Castles range from small keeps to 7000 polygon fortresses," says Adams. "They can be damaged, destroyed, or rebuilt. Men actually man the ramparts and fight to the death." Now, if you're smart you scouted or spied upon a castle before attacking it outright, but sometimes treachery won't work and plain ol' combat is in order. Don't expect to sneak a force up to the castle. Unlike the AI in so many 3D shooters, Adams says, "Accurate raycasting gives AI characters full awareness of their environments."

Bringing it all together

So, a strategy game with the scope of the old "epics" that lets us fight out the battles in the real-time 3D! splendor of the newcomers—what more could we ask for? Multiplayer? Adams says they expect to support 8-12 players (the final number hasn't been determined yet) working through either the full game or just the tactical battles (and yes, Virginia, there *is* a multiplayer save). You may take sides against the computer-controlled English or fight clan-to-clan in deathmatch; team with others in battle, with each player controlling one clans' leader and the forces under him. A *Braveheart* server is a possibility (this depends on how Mplayer, Eidos' primary online partner, wants to handle things) and if the game does well, Eidos is even considering releasing some of the game's editors—something that would let gaming "clans" create their own in-game clans right down to the kilts.

What, though, about the larger issues? Is this coming together of the best of both of the strategy gaming worlds just an aberration, a bump in all the confusion? It's hard to say but consider this: Electronic Arts is, independently, publishing *Shogun*, a game set in feudal Japan that sports a detailed, Koei-like strategic mode with beautiful-looking 3D tactical battles... sounds like a new trend is being born, one that may make any strategy gamer happy. ■



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EVERQUEST · 989 STUDIOS · WINDOWS 95,98

Behold the empty pizza box. What treasure might lie within? Pry open the cardboard…carefully…a trap? No. But, aha! 'Tis dried sauce and moldy cheese! No matter…now 'tis time to visit the john (may there please be toilet tissue), but wait! Is that not a fair maiden's voice that bespeaks…<leaning to one side, palm cupped behind ear> that bespeaks… *"The cat puked on the radiator again."* What say, milady? *"And it's trash night."* Yes! 'Tis music to mine ears! Not.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAMWORLD

BY CINDY YANS

WITH EVERQUEST, MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER GAMING TAKES A GIANT STEP

Obviously real life is not the stuff of which dreams are made, so it's easy to see why so many seek to escape the mundane. Massively multiplayer online gaming is the perfect escape for many of us to step outside of the world of the horn-honking commute, or first-period chemistry, or checkbook balancing, or microwaved Spagetti Os and into, well, the boots and gauntlets of someone completely different. It is the ultimate expansion of the couple-of-us-getting-together-for-*AD&D*-on-Saturday-night event. Role-playing with a *huge* variety of companions in a persistent world has proven to be an extremely popular concept. What was pioneered by others has been taken a few steps further in 989 Studios' *EverQuest*.

When Sony visited our offices (happily wielding beta copies of the game), we were bowled over by what appeared to be one of the most stunning and spectacular online worlds ever to hit the 'net. "I put my ass on the line and *guarantee* that you'll become hooked on this game," says PR manager Shon Damron. And here it is, on the line (as PR persons' asses should be), as we explore the surface of a world known as Norrath.

FIRST THERE WERE DRAGONS

Veeshan, the great Crystalline Dragon who rules the Plane of Sky, noticed the world called Norrath many thousands of years ago. She gouged its surface with her outstretched claws, staking her claim upon it. Now, the known world consists of five continents, the largest of which is Antonica, home to the humans, dark elves, barbarians, halflings, trolls and ogres. Next are Faydwer, home to the dwarves, gnomes, woodland elves and high elves; and Odus, home to the Erudites, or High Men as they are often called. Also, there is Kunark, a wild land that is largely unexplored, but which contains such cheerful regions as The Dreadlands, The Swamp of No Hope, Dragon Drool Lake and The Broken Teeth; and finally Velious, a continent of ice far to the south, where Veeshan had initially deposited her brood—not a casual vacation spot.

In addition to Veeshan, another entity was unable to pass up the opportunity to brand Norrath. Brell Serilis (a professional baseball name if ever there was one) created a magical portal to a cavern deep beneath Norrath. Having been tutored by Diablo, Serilis placed all sorts of creatures in the underworld, and then returned home, sealing his portal within a labyrinthine chamber of mystical Living Stone. He then called a meeting of Great Ones—Mother Tunare and Prexus, the Oceanlord. Not revealing that he had populated the underworld of Norrath, he proposed that each take charge of creating beings to protect the world's interests against the festering presence of Veeshan. Hence were born the races of Norrath.

WHAT 989 STUDIOS WANTS TO DO HERE

Since the beginning of MUDs, online role-playing has been refined and expanded to include bigger, better, faster, richer playing fields in which we can bow, shout, smile, dance, and kill ratlings. Lovers of these kinds of games all agree that community is what it's all about, and 989 Studios is no exception. "It's a player-versus-environment game. It's a cooperative game. It's about making friends online and going out in the environment," says Brad McQuaid, producer and designer of *EverQuest*. A given, right? But Sony has gone beyond the pale, it seems, and has made several key contributions to the genre.

First is the drop-dead gorgeous 3D engine that (bless its 3D accelerated heart) has not brought gameplay to its knees—at least in limited beta. It's got the feel of a 3D shooter, with a completely customizable keyboard and mouse-look toggle. You can run, jump, crouch, sit, and stand as you watch yourself or the action in a variety of camera angles. And the dynamic lighting? Our jaws dropped then, and continue to drop.

Another feature is the race-class system, which limits characters to specific skill-sets, and makes diverse party-building more or less crucial. But most importantly is the handling of the issue that has spoiled more online multiplayer role-playing for more people than any other thing (except perhaps lag)—player killing (PK). And the solution they've chosen is so simple, so elegant, that it's a wonder no one ever thought of this before (or perhaps it *had* been thought of, but human nature hadn't yet been proven to be as scummy as has recently been seen online).





[ABOVE] THE DYNAMIC LIGHTING, WEATHER AND SPELL EFFECTS PROVIDE SOME ABSOLUTELY SPECTACULAR SKYSCAPES AND SUNSETS

[LEFT] A THIRD PERSON VIEW OFTEN ENHANCES ONE'S SELF PERCEPTION. VIEW CHANGES ARE SOMETIMES ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESSFUL COMBAT—OR FLIGHT



[LEFT] A LOT OF ATTENTION HAS BEEN PAID TO SCALING THE EVERQUEST WORLD. NOTE THE RELATIVE SIZES OF THE CHARACTERS. PLAYERS WILL OFTEN HAVE TO LOOK UP OR DOWN TO SEE ONE ANOTHER, OR TO TARGET A MONSTER CORRECTLY.

[BELOW] BLUE NAMES INDICATE BENIGN PLAYERS, WHILE RED ONES INDICATE PLAYER-KILLERS



The system will accommodate three out of four types of role-players: The Natural Born Player-Killer whose fun lies in immediately jumping into the challenge of aggression against human opponents, bait and ambush, kill and rob, leave 'em lying in a pool of blood; The Acquired Taste Player-Killer, who waits until his stats are buffed a bit before taking on human opponents; and the Non-Player Killer whose focus is on cooperative play and questing within the parameters of the environment. The fourth kind, the Predatory Player-Killer, whose only pleasure lies in killing newbies and robbing players who don't want to play that way will *not* be accommodated here. Very simply, you choose at the beginning of the game to be either a Player-Killer (by delivering one of your two beginning quest scrolls) or not (by delivering the other… or not delivering any). You may deliver the PK quest scroll any time during the game to change your affiliation, but once you cross over, you may never return to the other side.

PK players may kill only other PK players and monsters and loot their corpses, while any non-PK player's corpse is invulnerable to looting (except by him or herself, or a specifically designated companion). After death, a non-PK player's corpse remains in the world for a set amount of time during which the player (whose spirit was returned to his starting city after death) may locate it and reclaim his possessions. Pretty slick, although sometimes it's hard to find your corpse, and if it's surrounded by baddies, or under the ocean, you may not be able to recover it anyway.

That's why it's a good idea to bring along a friend or two. *Everquest* has incorporated some nice "party" features as well. "Invite" another player to your party, and if they accept, they become a party member as long as they remain in the same zone as you. You can see their health bar at all times, and whenever party members kill a creature, the experience is divided amongst them. This settles the age-old debate of "who gets to make the kill" that plagued party-travelers in other online role-playing games (RPGs).

SO WHAT ABOUT THE "QUEST"?

So there you are, with your low level weapon, bicycle shorts, and a few morsels of food and water. Now what? "Show me the quests!" Your first quest scroll, as mentioned above, is with you at the start of the game. It is an invitation to deliver it to your Guildmaster and receive your Guild tunic (or the like) in return. But what about other quests? Some quests may be completed in a matter of hours and some are designed to take weeks. Quests will be obtained throughout the game, from NPCs, from scrolls, perhaps even from other players who will create their own. Here are a few examples of specific quests centered around the Circle of Unseen Hands, the Rogues Guild of Qeynos.

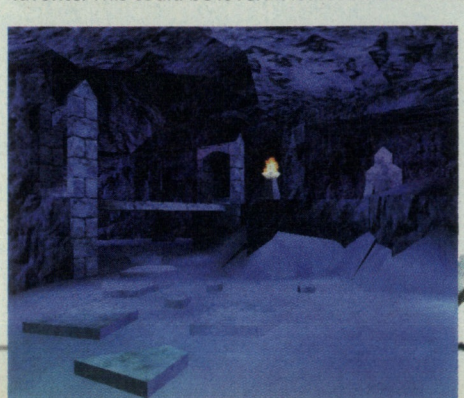
Knargon's Quest—The player finds a letter from J'Racol Knargon which tells him to go outside the city gates at night to pick up a shipment of goods from Carson McCabe. The player must find J'Racol and give him proof that he works for the Circle. J'Racol gives the player a Note to Hanns from Carson, which says that the shipment will be late due to a mole in Carson's forces that is leaking information to a group of bandits. The player returns the Note to Hanns to Knargon to complete the quest.

Zannison's Quest—Hanns wants Zannison to send some men over to Highpass to help McCabe get in line. Zannison has already sent his men to Highpass, and tells the player to meet up with them. The player goes to Highpass and meets up with Prak, who assigns the player the task of eliminating Carson's mole who is hanging out in the Highpass thieves camp.

From these examples, we can tell that not only do we have activities that are from the find-this-and-bring-it-back school of questing, but tasks that are time sensitive, and sometimes interwoven.

WE CAN'T HELP IT

The best part about *EverQuest* so far seems to lie in the immersiveness of the gameworld (usually a "buzzword phrase," but not here). The first time you walk your character (a 3D object) onto a ship (another 3D object) and sail into the 3D world, walking around the ship and watching the colors of the most beautiful dawn in recent memory; the first time you are pummeled by a Hill Giant who takes *much* bigger steps than you, and spend the rest of the evening attempting to find your corpse so as not to lose your hard-earned cash; the first time a mysterious stranger bows and offers a trinket in remembrance; the first time you duck into an igloo to get out of a dynamically lit lightning and thunderstorm, listening to the raindrops falling all around—this could be the next year's online favorite. This could be love. At least someone's ass is safe. ■



IN THIS PERMAFROST REGION, COLD RESISTANCE ITEMS ARE A MUST



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Steppin' Out

Companies blaze new genre trails



By Tom Chick

Wargasm
DID
Windows 95

Panzer Elite
Psygnosis
Windows 95

The pie is getting bigger. More gamers means wider audiences, so it's not as risky for game companies to flex their genres, vying for a bigger slice of that consumer pie. This is the thinking behind such anomalies as TalonSoft's *Tribal Rage* and Electronic Arts' use of the *Jane's F-15* engine for the streamlined arcade play of *Fighter Pilot*. Not familiar with either of those titles? Consider it an indication of the risks involved when a company leaves familiar terrain.

Nevertheless, this isn't stopping Psygnosis and Digital Image Design (DID) from a little genre flexing. Psygnosis, known for colorful and creative action games, is putting the finishing touches on an ultra-realistic World War II tank simulation. DID, known most recently for their serious *F-22 Air Defense Fighter* and its dynamic campaign add-on, *Total Air War*, is targeting the more casual crowd with a real-time strategy/action hybrid. Whether these experiments in steppin' out prove successful or not remains to be seen.

What's old is new again?

You might consider DID's *Wargasm* a return to their roots rather than a complete departure from their traditional fare. Among their earliest titles, *Inferno* was an arcade space shooter, *TFX* was more an action game than a flight sim, and *Robocop III*…well, you can imagine. The first thing you'll notice about *Wargasm* is, of course, the name. "We've had people throw their arms up in alarm," says DID's Don Whiteford. "We've had people say 'great name.' Most importantly, we have not had indifference to the name, which would worry me more." DID's PR department seems keenly aware of the unusual potential to market *Wargasm*: "Skip the foreplay and get down to business," they croon shamelessly. "Practice different techniques and positions…designed for those who enjoy domination…Multiple *Wargasm*—Fulfill all your fantasies against real opponents."

Whiteford confidently says it's the game, not the name, people will ultimately remember. *Wargasm* uses DID's 3Dream engine ("It's an engine that makes it a dream to develop 3D games on," he quips), which draws a spare and very smooth Direct 3D world with naturalistic terrain and detailed man-made objects. The engine has no connection to the company's flight sims, "Although the tank models and ballistics modeling use similar technology," Whiteford says. It's a testament to the 3Dreams' flexibility that players can choose to play as an infantryman, a tank, or a helicopter, each of which makes very different demands on a game engine. DID has even used the engine to build some flight sim prototypes which might be developed into full-blown games.

Wargasm has a lot in common with Cyclone's *Uprising*, Activision's *Battlezone*, and Microsoft's *Urban Assault*. The idea is that by using a 3D engine, the player can sit inside a real-time strategy game. *Wargasm* is set in a virtual war motif that limits the number of units you can bring into a scenario: your main restriction is "web space'" (don't worry, you don't have to know any HTML). Flying in the face of the virtual war concept, the single player game is fought across a map of the world, with appropriate terrain and weather conditions in different areas.

There are seven campaigns, one for each continent. When you finish a mission, you'll unlock branching choices for the next mission. You'll also receive technology upgrades that bring new units, weapons, and equipment. For instance, standard infantry will be replaced with special forces with more powerful guns. Helicopters will go from Hinds, to Comanches, to Future Comanches. You give orders to your units from an overhead map, or you can jump around, inhabiting different units at will.

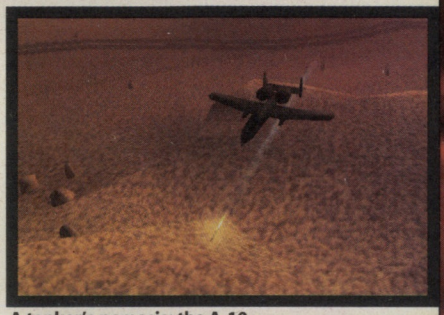
The battlefield has several elements beyond the three types of controllable units. Re-supply helicopters can be called in for additional units and ammo during the course of the battle. You'll eventually earn the capability to call in air strikes and use Dark Star reconnaissance drones. Mobile AAA units can be included in your choice of units for a mission. Players will even be able to man fixed defensive AAA emplacements to snipe at helicopters. Some levels will have minefields that block certain areas, although you can cross them if you're willing to risk the damage.

The control scheme is unique for each of the units, of course. The tank's turret and long range sights are a significant part of its interface. The heli-



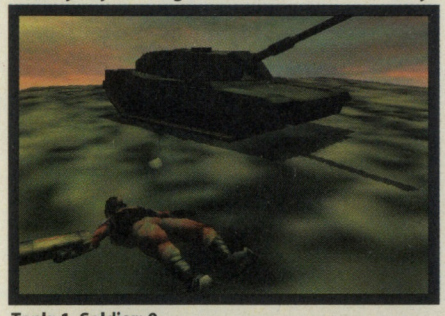
Clearing a ridge, Wargasm-style


They've found your range!


A tanker's nemesis: the A-10


Infantrymay not weigh 60 tons, but it can be sneaky


Kill the tank and the soldier will follow


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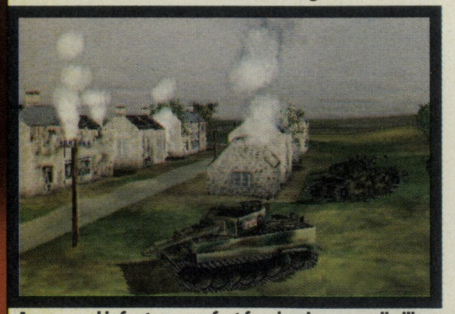
Hundreds of spells and enchanted items enable you to conjure magic, gain special abilities and ensure your survival.

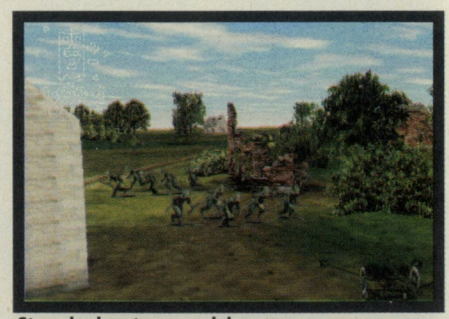


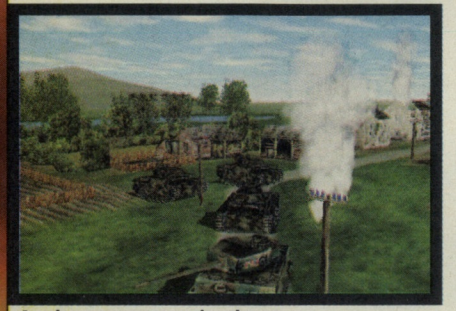
Interact with scores of intriguing characters as you trek through six distinct gameworlds including: the Frozen Wastes, the Shattered Desert, and the haunted Underworld.

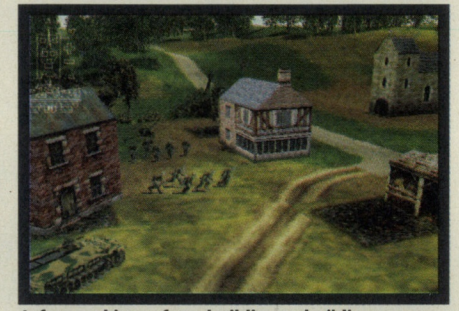


Shermans wonder "where's that Tiger?"


Armor and infantry—perfect for clearing a small village


Stugs look out over a plain


A column moves cautiously out


Infantry skitters from building to building.


Italian vistas, WW II-style


A Sherman hidden in ruins ambushes a German unit


Panzer Elite features long engagement ranges


A Jagdpanther, armed for bear (or Sherman, rather)


Stugs look out over a plain


Armored knife fight under stormy skies

copter is the most maneuverable unit, but it has the added challenge of also moving vertically. Infantrymen can ride in groups of four in armored personnel carriers with machine guns. However, their chief advantage is the ability to stay hidden and place bombs. Enemy units will only show up when they've been spotted, which can be tricky considering the various factors DID has modeled: everything from weather to time of day to radar will determine who can see whom. Whiteford, however, wouldn't elaborate on the specifics. "Figuring out how to incorporate this into your tactics is part of the fun," he said. Don't expect *Wargasm* to ship with a thick manual.

DID, an English company, has worked with consultants from the British military on certain elements of the game. "It's based loosely on real world battlefield tactics which have been adapted for playability. Hence the involvement of the British Army. They have provided all sorts of information and given feedback on development," says Whiteford. "In fact, they will be using the game in one of their mobile recruitment units and they made a major feature of it at the Royal Tournament in London this year."

Wargasm began as a technology demonstration for military training simulators. Whiteford explains the next step in its development: "Playing the network version made it obvious how much fun it was to race around a battle zone blowing the crap out of anyone and everything. It really does look realistic too, which adds to the experience." *Wargasm*'s combat might be best described as extremely cinematic. Explosions and gun recoil shake the virtual camera. Lighting effects flash, smoke pours up, and sub-woofers tremble. Your radio crackles with messages from your units. In the background, the CD plays actual symphonic recordings of some spirited Wagner, Beethoven, and Verdi: stuff from the Ring Cycle, the obligatory Ode to Joy, and a brisk rendition of the second movement of Beethoven's 7th Symphony, for instance. *Wargasm* is nothing if not extravagant.

Perhaps this "esprit de guerre" is enough to make *Wargasm* succeed where *Battlezone*, *Uprising*, and *Urban Assault* have only done moderately well, commercially speaking. But if not, this change of pace for DID will at least be a name to remember.

Get serious

Ironically, Psygnosis would be the sort of company you'd expect to do a game called *Wargasm*; it seems like the next step after their *Ecstatica* series. Instead, Psygnosis is publishing the somberly titled *Panzer Elite*, which hopes to break the curse of the tank sims, a doom as inexorable as Greek fate, April taxes, or superhero game cancellations. SSI, MicroProse, and Interactive Magic have all orphaned half-hearted and underdone tank sims on gamers' doorsteps. Without exception, these have all been products leaning towards realism, products that merely needed a little more development (*Panzer Commander*), a slightly stronger commitment from their publishers (*iPanzer '44*), or perhaps more time until end of the fiscal quarter (*M1 Tank Platoon II*). And without exception, they've all fallen prey to "the curse" for some reason or another.

Maybe no one has told the folks at Psygnosis about "the curse"—after all, they're new to serious sims. As long as they don't know what

they're up against, maybe their naiveté will save *Panzer Elite*. Besides, since the bigger boys keep fumbling, let's see what the new kid on the sim block can do.

Perhaps it will help that *Panzer Elite* is being developed by a German company, with the somewhat ironic name Wings Simulations. They've availed themselves of their local resources, consulting original blueprints and manuals, WWII veterans, new-found film footage, and Munster's Panzer Museum [http://www.clark.net/pub/mrhicks1/PanzermuseumMunster/english1.htm] in their attempt to create a realistic simulation. Although this commitment to realism seems to be at the heart of their efforts, they've opened the game to various levels of play by letting gamers choose how much realism they want. For instance, there are different options for the ballistics model. You can choose to have shells fly straight every time (if you can sight it, you can hit it) or you can apply gravity so you'll have to compensate for range. The most realistic setting even factors in wind, spin, and even munitions production. Later in the war, saboteurs in German plants slipped dud ammo into the mix. If you've ever had the misfortune of suffering through the realistic dud torpedoes in Dynamix's *Aces of the Deep*, you know why the Germans lost the war: they were blinded by frustration.

The realism extends down to *Panzer Elite*'s smaller details, too. Tanks were unable to use magnetic compasses because of all the metal in their hulls. The Germans experimented with gyroscopic compasses, but these weren't very effective in the rough and tumble environs of a tank interior. So if you enable the option for realistic navigation, you have to get your bearings by comparing landmarks to the tactical map (which can be set to show only your unit, all spotted units, or all units). If a crewmember is killed, you have to manually jump to his station to do his job, whether it's driving the tank (complete with a realism setting for a manual gearshift), loading the ammo or sighting the gun.

"Our [damage] model follows the path of the shell after it penetrates the armor," says Wings' Teut Weidemann. "This model allows us to simulate the various effects of ammunition inside the tank." This means you can knock out a tank's treads, destroy its radio, ruin its cooling system, or, for a particularly spectacular kill, detonate its ammo supply (a distressingly common occurrence in some American designs). Disabled tanks can be abandoned to save their crews, which is particularly important in campaign games once you've racked up some valuable experience.

The game's realism goes hand-in-hand with its graphics engine, which models terrain in three theaters of operations: Italy, North Africa, and France. Environments include detailed villages with destroyable buildings, gates, walls and even telegraph poles. There are individual trees and bushes clustered together for copses instead of the "tree walls" representing impassable forests in other tank sims. Perhaps most importantly, the graphics engine supports long range engagements. Although the rendering distance only extends to about 500 meters (1000 meters when using the binoculars view), a "flatplane" is used to allow visibility, and engagements, at up to 3600 meters. Out here, vehicles are rendered only if you have a clear line of sight to them, and if your crew's spotting skill is sufficient to sight it. Otherwise, it's completely featureless.

Although most engagements took place around the 1000 meter range, this longer range support will allow Germans their historical advantage. "Using the German optics gives you the ability to judge distances because they have calibrated measurement reticles," says Weidemann, "The Americans didn't have that and had to judge by experience and aim with shooting." Superior American artillery support will allow them to call in smoke barrages (richly drawn with thick smoke graphics) to cut down German visibility and allow the Allies to safely close to ranges where their guns are more effective.

> "Our [damage] model follows the path of the shell after it penetrates the armor, this model allows us to simulate the various effects of ammunition inside the tank."
> Teut Weidemann, Wings Simulations

Panzer Elite can be played from an external view when you're driving "unbuttoned," meaning your crew members are poking their heads out of hatches and enjoying the scenery. Depending on the realism setting you've chosen, this may make your men vulnerable to being killed by artillery and small arms fire. In combat situations, or when driving through areas where infantry might be lying in wait, it's prudent to play from the game's fully rendered 3D interiors. These cockpit views are unique for each tank. "For example, the early Shermans used periscopes you need to rotate in order to look to the side," Weidemann says. "Thus, those tanks were vulnerable from the sides simply because they didn't see you approaching. Later, when better models were introduced, the player sees the obvious advantage those tanks had in terms of visibility."

Panzer Elite will include 40 missions (14 in Normandy, 14 in Italy and Sicily, and 12 in North Africa) with some random friendly and enemy starting positions. Each mission can be played singly, from either the German or American perspective. Some missions take place over great distances, since the maps can be as large as 40 square kilometers. The mission briefings take place as if the tactical map were unrolled on a table, with marks being made on the map to illustrate unit movement and enemy locations while a voiceover narrates your orders.

The single missions can also be strung together into campaigns which track your progress and reward or punish you accordingly. Your performance earns you a score after each mission, spelled out in detail on a debriefing screen. An early build of the game recounts everything from the number of hits you scored versus soft target, hard targets, and infantry to the number of shots taken. Your score, which is calculated from all these statistics, then determines what resources are available for you in later missions: the type and number of tanks, the amount and types of ammo and even the quantity of fuel. The campaign games also allow Wings Simulations to model the supply problems facing the Germans. It's one thing to not have enough Tiger tanks or armor-piercing ammo, but imagine the embarrassment of having only enough fuel for half your platoon.

Panzer Elite is played from a platoon commander's perspective. Each member of your platoon is rated for morale, as well as experience in spotting, engineering, gunnery, and command. From within your tank, you'll be able to order formation changes, give waypoints, order your platoon into hull-down positions, send your platoon into hiding or specify targets. A small mouse-driven heads-up display appears in the upper right corner of all the screens. In typical German fashion of stringing words together, Weidemann calls it the "tankmouse" (this rolls off the tongue wonderfully as "Panzermaus"). This little interactive display can be used to issue commands to your platoon, switch views, traverse the turret, and steer the tank.

Weidemann admits the game won't include aircraft. Wings Simulations was modeling airstrikes with their artillery effect, but they weren't happy with the results. However, they are including infantry in the sim, a feat that has either been ignored (*Panzer Commander*) or underdone (*M1 Tank Platoon II*) in other tank sims.

"Infantry is important to us, because without them, a tank simulation cannot be complete," Weidemann says. "How can you simulate a tank and its combat environment when you have left out obvious factors?" He explains that *Panzer Elite*'s infantry will use cover, hiding behind foliage and walls and even using smoke to cover open ground. If infantry aren't armed with anti-tank weapons, they'll wait until you're close enough for a close assault that may immobilize your tank.

As with the infantry, *Panzer Elite*'s tank AI is designed to weigh optimum weapon ranges and different types of ammo. Allied armor will know that it has to drive into the teeth of superior German guns to have any hope of penetrating their armor, so they'll try to lay smoke to close the range. However, each unit's knowledge and decisions are influenced by its skill level. "A green unit does not use knowledge as an elite unit would. We do not want the AI to be omnipotent or to cheat," says Weidemann.

The list of tanks the player can operate for the Germans includes three Panzer III variants, three Panzer IV variants, three Panther variants, and an early and late model Tiger. The Americans can drive any of seven Sherman M4 variants or an M10.

Panzer Elite won't repeat Hitler's mistake on the East Front: it will wait until Spring to launch.

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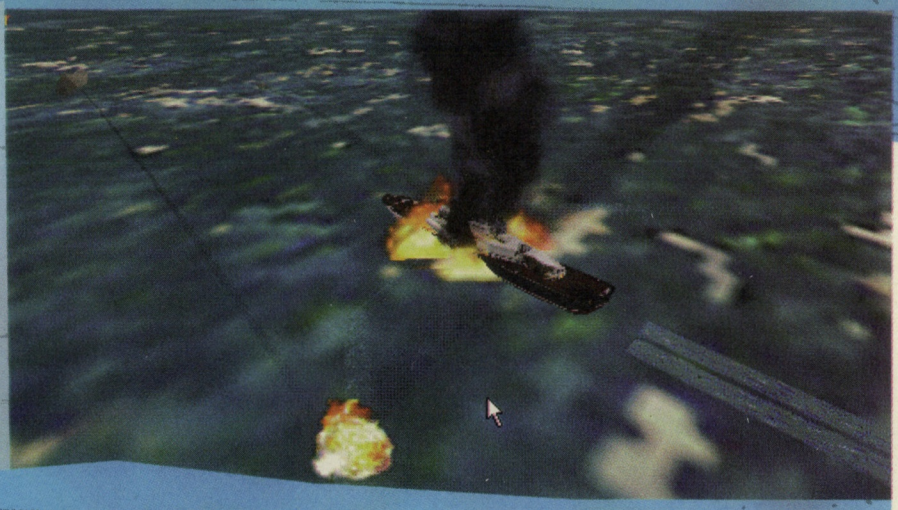
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"Driving forces," those singular elements that, all by themselves, seem to direct the flow of things along certain pathways. In the world writ large the automobile is a driving force (pun not intended)—can you imagine how drastically different today's society (not to mention landscape) would be without the car? Look at how MTV and its music videos have become a driving force in television as a whole; from advertising to sports shows to sitcoms, all have been changed or redirected in some way, all because of the driving force of the music video.



DRIVING FORCES

BY SCOTT UDELL

Major forces in the development of Jane's Fleet Command

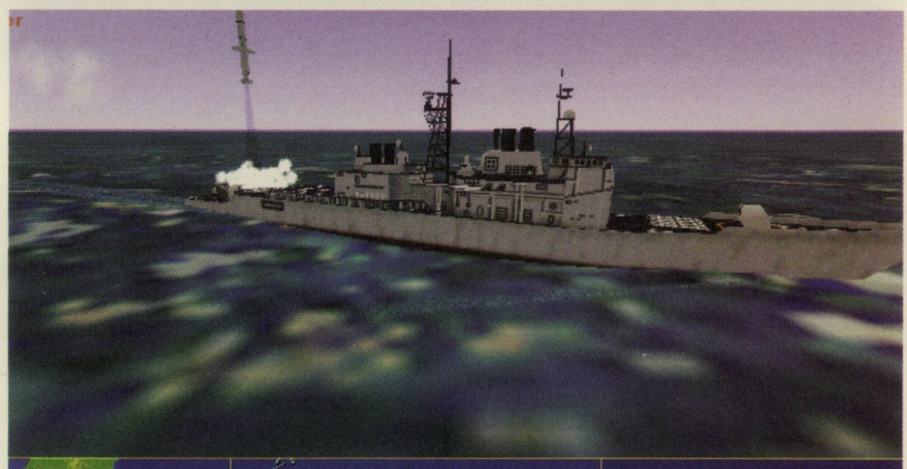
Computer gaming itself is hardly immune to driving forces; rather, it seems to embrace them, for good or for ill, with a passion. Often the driving forces are, understandably, technological. In times of yore, the cathode ray tube, the CRT or monitor, became a driving force. No longer did you have to print out reams of paper to play that *Trek* game on the mainframe. Then the personal computer became a driving force, and commercial gaming was born. Then came graphics, and the text adventure died out or fled to the realms of multi-user dungeons (MUDs) on the Internet. Joysticks, sound, CD-ROMs, all have been driving forces at one time.

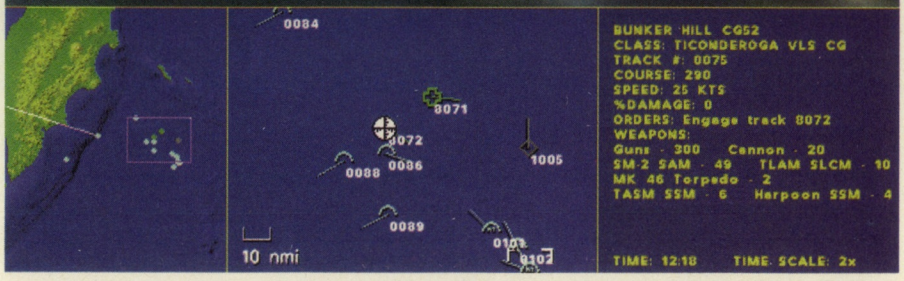
Today two driving forces are noticeably present: 3D is largely a technological one, while real-time strategy (RTS) is largely a design, or stylistic one. Both are having major impacts throughout the gaming community, both in the gaming communities or genres they originated in and, as driving forces are wont to do, in other areas as well. 3D, supported by 3D accelerator cards and wildly inflating processor speeds, is having the greatest impact. From action gaming where it started to adventure gaming, sports, and even strategy gaming, 3D is "it" these days. Similarly, RTS is shaking strategy gaming to its foundations. Both of these driving forces are being felt—often in conjunction—in the unlikeliest of gaming corners; these two forces are shaping a game that, in times past, could very well have been a 2D, turn-based wargame instead.

You need more dimension, baby

When you start up a game in an early pre-release version of Jane's *Fleet Command*, the first thing you'll notice is the 3D view window. We have a game covering modern naval combat, something that often involves multiple ships, subs, and aircraft fighting over vast distances,







[top to bottom] **A bad, bad day for Nimitz; A ship-to-ship missile ends its journey; Launching a missile**

ones usually far longer than the ol' Mark I Eyeball can see. So why 3D? Why go to all the effort to put in simulator-like detail when you, as the fleet commander, would normally be looking at a 2D map (or, these days, map display) of huge reaches of water and land?

"Because it's *cool*!," is the group response from the game's developer Sonalysts, an honest answer, with no attempt to explain it with terms like "military simulation necessity" or other such folderol. Gamers love technological gee-whizery more than most, and while gameplay is critical it sure is fun to spice it up with cool looking stuff.

And cool looking the game is, even in its pre-alpha state. Sonalysts has plenty of experience in the naval world (indeed, some 50% of their business is still tied in with the Department of Defense, much of it with the Navy), so they've got a lot of expertise to draw from. The Jane's tie-in is letting them pull in unclassified information, including visuals, by the boatloads. They're modeling, in game terms and 3D graphics terms, the ships, subs, and aircraft from some 16 nations. Electronic Arts' Ed Gwynn says that many of the features yet to be implemented are actually on the graphics side (not gameplay).

Some old computer sea dogs may, nevertheless, be a bit nervous at this point. They may remember *Fleet Command*'s spiritual if not actual gaming ancestor, *Harpoon II*, a real-time (or "continuous-time") wargame/simulation that, while only 2D, still managed to bring the then-admiral of processors, the 90 MHz Pentium, to its knees. The cause was, in large part, its mathematical models of things like missiles flying, guns firing, radar sweeping, and whatnot. The question from these old salts might be, "Is your 3D modeling being done at the expense of your simulation?" The answer, apparently, is no; Sonalysts' Michael Kolar, AI & Simulation Programmer for the game, says their modeling remains just as detailed as it was in their previous game, *688i*, a very involved submarine simulation. He points out that the game offloads much of the 3D gravy onto the 3D accelerator card (a Direct3D card will be *required* to play the game), leaving the CPU free to handle the meat of the simulation.

Despite the 3D visuals, not all of the game-world is being tracked in 3D; specifically, damage isn't calculated by tracking where a missile, torpedo, or shell hits a ship. "Weapons either hit or miss or are destroyed," says Gwynn. "We don't track what part of the target gets hit, just whether or not it *is* hit. The specific damage done is a die roll, yes—not so much based on the type of weapon but more on what systems exist that can be damaged (sonar, radar, weapons, communications, etc.)."

It's real, baby—time, that is

Okay, so the game will give us pretty pictures, but what about the gameplay? The marketing side of Jane's really, *really* wants us to call it a real-time strategy game. More accurate labels might be real-time operational-level naval simulation (too clunky) or real-time wargame, but it really doesn't matter what you call it—it's how it plays that counts. Many who hear "RTS" might think *Command & Conquer* with just the ships—"It's got a cruiser rush, dude!"—but aside from running in real-time, being able to drag-select units, and having a relatively easy-to-use interface, this game puts a much more real-world spin on real-time gaming.

The sea dogs are more likely to compare *Fleet Command* to *Harpoon* and, especially, *Harpoon II* (not to mention the upcoming *Harpoon*[4]), both real-time war simulations with a sea-salty flavor, and the comparison would be understandable… to a point. You control groups of naval forces at sea, groups ranging in size from just a few vessels and/or aircraft on up to full fleets. You give them movement orders, target orders, and/or search orders, and have to coordinate an ever-more complex dance as the action heats up. Unlike *688i*, which was criticized for being too repetitive, missions in *Fleet Command* can have plenty of randomized elements and multiple goals will mean you just have more to do than you would when commanding a single sub. Another point to calm the old salts: despite the RTS nature of gameplay, Jane's isn't forgetting the folks that like to ponder their moves. In the single player game you'll be able to pause the game and explore the situation and issue orders to your heart's content.

The campaign is currently composed of four regional mission areas which are, in essence, mega-scenarios with many more goals and randomized elements than *688i*. You'll also get linkage from region to region, so if you lose, say, all your carriers in one region they won't be available in the next. In addition to the campaign, the game will include an estimated 12 single missions (this number may grow), some tutorial scenarios, and a mission editor.

The point where *Fleet Command* pulls away from the earlier *Harpoon* games is in its user interface, which is much more accessible. Here is where we truly see the driving force of RTS at work. You can group select units, although that can be inefficient; instead, you're more likely to select an individual unit and issue it orders via a pop-up menu. The level of control is not as detailed as in *Harpoon*, but given the role you assume that's actually more realistic.

Another area where the RTS driving force becomes apparent is in multiplayer. When Jane's set out to do a sequel to *688i*, they'd originally planned on a detailed simulation of a single surface vessel, one that would link into *688i*. Instead, the game morphed into the larger command simulation that is *Fleet Command* (which will *not* link with *688i*). Depending on how the scenario designer has built a scenario, players may take sides against each other or work cooperatively against other humans or the AI. Different players may be given command of different components of a force. As Sonalysts' Dan Bowdler (scenario designer and "subject matter expert"—he spent some 10 years in the Navy) joked, you could even put someone in charge of a warehouse on shore if you wanted to.

Driving Ms. Sea Dog

Who'd have thunk it five years ago: a naval command simulation that's both real-time and has a hefty 3D component. Sure, real-time, or continuous time, actually makes a lot of sense for this sort of game, but 3D is something of a shocker. It shows the power of the driving forces that publishers, and perhaps gamers, want to see replicated in almost *any* kind of game, even if they're "operational-level naval simulations" [psst—wargame]. ■



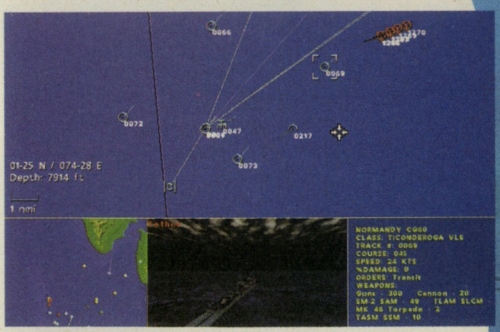
As with most Jane's games, expect a full set of reference material, including animated ship views the Jane's books only wish they could display



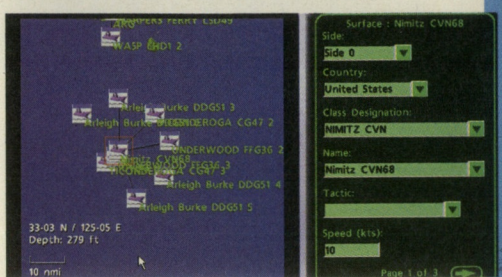
For those not familiar with Naval NTIDS symbology, Jane's will offer up the optional "3D" icons



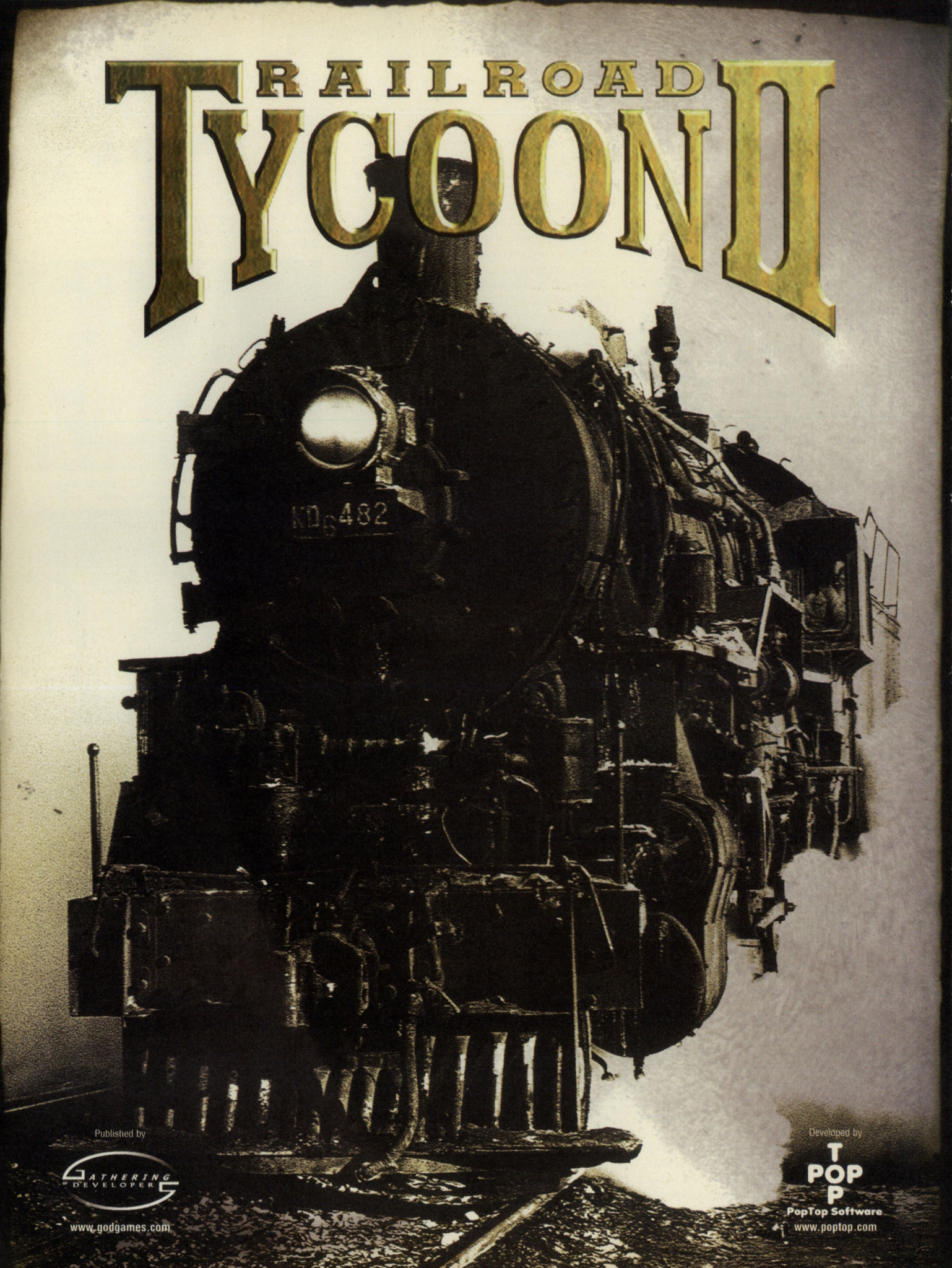
Expect a number of FMV sequences (note the game the admiral's playing on his laptop)



The map view can be made primary. Here we see that the Indian subs were forgotten in the rush to deal with the Indian surface and air threats; that line of red torpedo icons informs us of our mistake

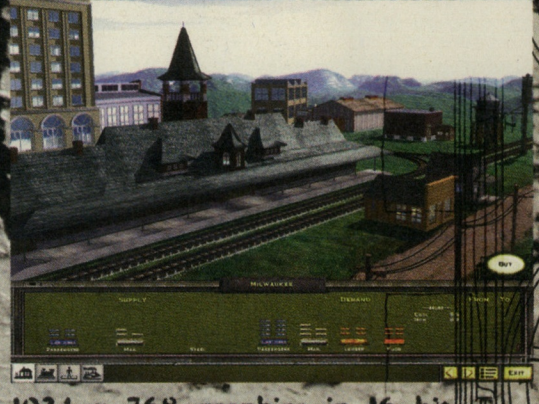


Placing a carrier battle group in the game's scenario editor


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Don't get left at the station.

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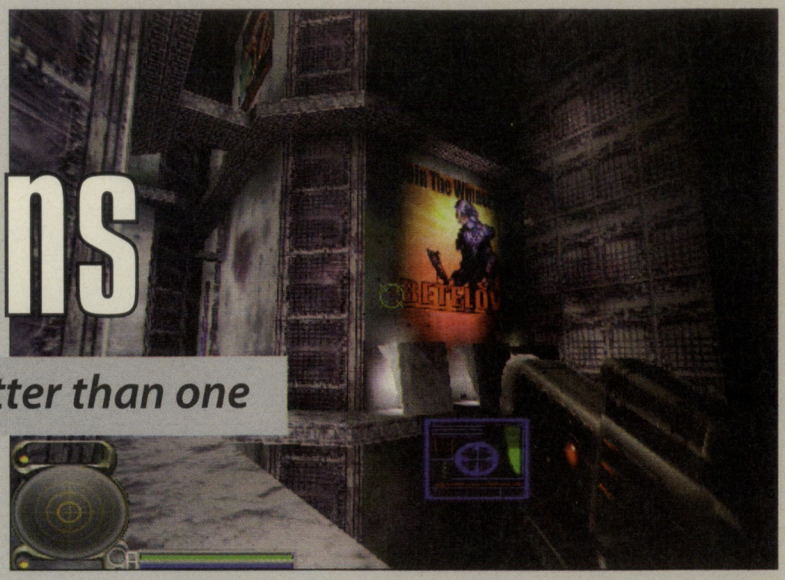
A STRATEGY GAME THAT RUNS ON A TOTALLY DIFFERENT KIND OF ENGINE.

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We have seen the future, and it is neon

Hired Guns

Because four heads are better than one



Hired Guns was a 1993 Amiga title that met with limited success in the US but managed to do pretty well in Europe. It divided the screen into the separate perspectives of four characters, combining elements of action, role-playing and adventure games. Psygnosis is revisiting this hybrid with a remake rather than a sequel; you'll find no Roman numerals after *Hired Guns*.

What you will find, unless MicroProse's *X-COM: Alliance* comes out first, is a unique use of the *Unreal* engine. Both *Alliance* and *Hired Guns* take the *Unreal* engine and split it up into mini-screens, each showing the perspective of a different character. In *Hired Guns*, your primary window is the biggest, with three small windows along the bottom of the screen and a control panel to the right. The developers at Devil's Thumb confess that the split screens may take a toll on framerate. "It'll probably be smoother in full screen," says Brett Close, "but we think we've done a pretty good job doing it this way." He demonstrates that the game is playable in windows, even with the code in its early stages.





Checking out the sights with your friends

The control panel allows you to send commands to the rest of your team, such as lead, follow, rally, cover and various options for formations. You can order characters to patrol or hide at scripted points in each level. You can also designate a location for characters to fire; this way your team can lay down suppressing fire while you advance a point man. Orders can also be queued up and stored as macros, so a single hot key can be used for instant responses to various situations.

Although they're still deciding the finer points of character development, it seems that *Hired Guns* will only make a token nod to role-playing games. Unlike the original, which featured a choice from about a dozen mercenaries, this incarnation has a pre-set party of four characters, each with a special ability that gets more efficient as they gain experience. If any characters are killed during a mission, they can be revived in the clone bank, but without the experience that would have been earned had they survived. The main character, Kirchner, slowly regenerates his health over time and he can heal other characters. Osverger can withstand the most damage and he'll be more proficient with heavy weapons. Rorien will have night vision that's particularly useful in certain levels.

One of the more interesting aspects of the game has to do with Myriel's special ability. She can interface with computers, which lets her move through the game's cyberspace levels. Anyone who remembers *System Shock* will recognize the inspiration for these mesmerizing levels, drawn with psychedelic lights, colors, and shapes. Myriel will have to fight viruses and countermeasures to trip switches and gather data.

Hired Guns' cyberpunk setting will be sleeker and brighter than those found in many first-person shooters. "We don't want the same *Quake*-y monochromatic look throughout," says Close. Many of the levels are oriented vertically rather than horizontally. Close demonstrates an early build of a vast city level, which gets darker and more run down as you go deeper. Eventually such levels will be stocked with civilians, sushi bars, and cybernetic enemies. Close says they've had to write their own AI to accommodate these vertical levels.

The world of *Hired Guns* is dominated by three corporations, all focusing on different technologies: bio-genetics, military and hi-tech. Most of the game's enemies will be mutants, cybernetic guards, robots and armed humans. One of Devil's Thumb's more insidious creations is the Grenade Kid, a suicidal child draped in explosives who runs up and pulls the pin. *Hired Guns* may be the first game to have you sniping at children.

Devil's Thumb has some unique weapons in store, too. The force field projector sets up temporary walls for protection or to block passageways. Hovermines are tracking spider bombs which activate when you get close to them. The grappling hook tractor beam will provide something that we've only seen in *Quake* mods. A bio grenade will stun opponents and leave characters with blurred vision, kind of like the poison spiders in *Hexen*.

In multiplayer games, players can each control their own team, using the four characters to amass firepower or set up ambushes. You can also split up control of a team among multiple players, using the inset windows to see what your allies are doing.

You'll be able to split your screen with *Hired Guns* this Spring. *–Tom Chick*

Hired Guns • Psygnosis • Windows 95

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Close Combat III

Four years of Hell



The game features a variety of new battlefield types, including the massive factory complexes in and around Stalingrad (note that you can only "see" the part of the building you're in)

Game series can follow one of two paths: each game in the series can follow lock-step after the other, with little change from game-to-game, or each one can be quite different from previous games; each path has its own strengths and weaknesses, so perhaps the wisest course is for a developer to follow *both* paths. As with *A Bridge Too Far*, developer Atomic games is doing just that with *Close Combat III: The Russian Front*.

The game follows the path of similarity in a number of general areas: the graphic look, while more colorful than earlier games, is stylistically related, the interface is much the same, and you're still leading troops in historically-accurate, real-time tactical battles. If you've played a previous *Close Combat* title chances are you can jump right in and begin to play without even a peek at the manual (or the rest of this preview). The better chance, though, is that you want to know what's new (be you a veteran of the series or a green gamer), and there is plenty, from the sublime to the subtle.



The new waypoints feature should gives you finer control over the movement of your troops

With Close Combat III, armor finally gets more than second billing

Major differences are the scope of the game; whereas *Close Combat* had you working through a narrowly-focused series of firefights in Normandy, and *A Bridge Too Far* had you work operations in a single battle (Operation Market-Garden), battles you'll fight in *The Russian Front* are selected from four years of war in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Germany. This gives the game a broad strategic scope lacking from the earlier games, despite the fact that most of your time is spent in tactical combat. Between battles you're team management is more critical than it was in even *A Bridge Too Far*: rest a team, re-equip it, bring in fresh but green troops, "spend" your prestige on getting the best or save it for a rainy (or snowy, or muddy, or otherwise miserable) day, all are decisions you'll face.



The beta build we looked at for this article included 27 historical battles, 16 multi-map "operations," and 15 campaigns (linked operations). Each operation encompasses a different part of the theatre, from the Soviet frontier at the start of Operation Barbarossa to the gates of Moscow (even into Red Square) to Stalingrad and all the way back to Berlin. The Grand Campaign features 15 different operations encompassing most of the maps. The scenario editor now lets you create operations as well, but the game's complex maps (Microsoft says they are three times larger than the earlier games') apparently preclude a map editor.

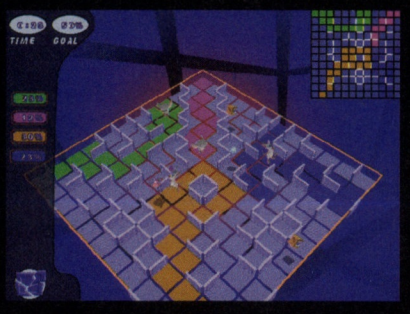
While the strategic focus is the biggest change, there are plenty of actual gameplay enhancements you'll encounter on your tactical battlefield. Armor was a significant factor on the Russian Front, and you'll get battles that are almost all-tank in *The Russian Front*. Taking an interface page from *Command & Conquer*-like games, you can now group select units and issue them like orders (be they movement, targeting, or the like); if movement, units or vehicles will try to stay in the formation they started in. Similarly, you can assign units to groups for rapid access. Gamers' cries have been heard at Atomic and an optional waypoint feature has been added; similarly, scenarios may feature off-board artillery too (these aren't under the your control, however, so watch where you step!).

Of the 300 team types, 100 weapon types, 60 soldier types, and 80 vehicle and anti-tank gun types, one new unit stands out. The commander (which will initially be you, although you can add more leaders if you want to spend the prestige points on them) can be used to rally broken troops, to shore up inexperienced or stressed out units, or to make sure units on the assault follow your orders. The more experienced the leader the greater his command radius, but don't leave him hanging out alone in between two units—seeing him knifed by a lone enemy soldier is more than distressing… it could mean the difference between winning and losing a battle. *–Scott Udell*

Close Combat III: The Russian Front • Microsoft • Windows 95, 98







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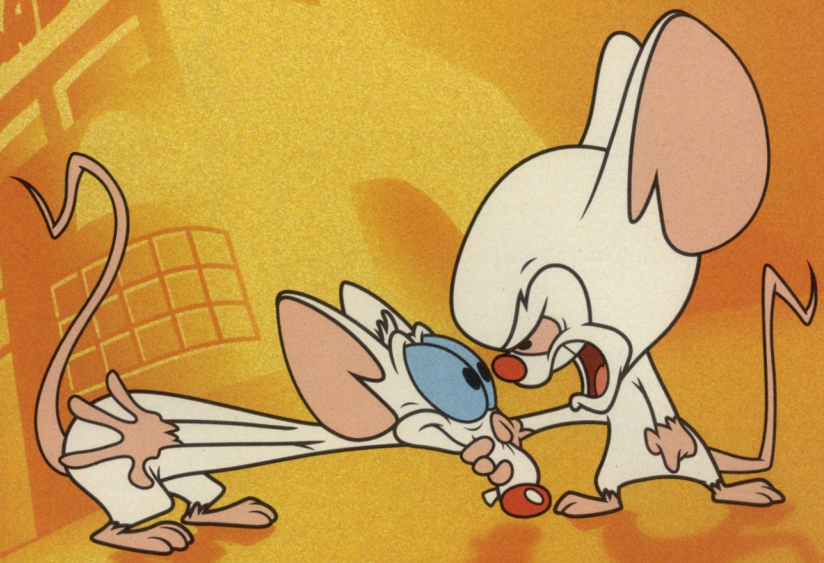
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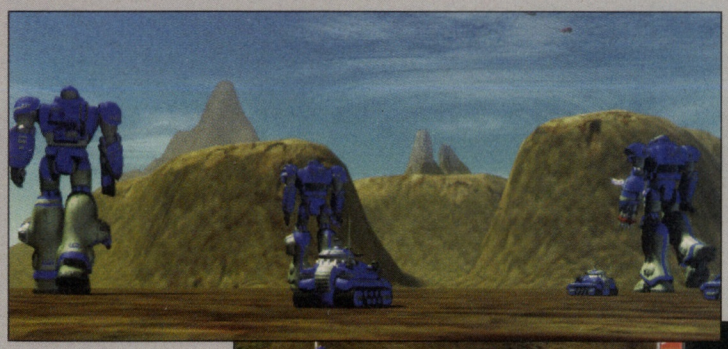


The 3D terrain plays a key role in the game ▶

"We're looking to change the way strategy games work," proclaims Zono's Jason Hough. Pretty lofty ambitions. At first blush, Zono's *Metal Fatigue*, which will be published by Psygnosis, looks rather conventional. Its 3D terrain and resource model are reminiscent of *Total Annihilation*. Its three somewhat distinct sides aren't up to par with *Starcraft*'s races. *Metal Fatigue* uses camera controls right out of *Myth*. You have your standard-issue fog of war and only a small handful of vehicles: tanks, artillery, a missile car, two kinds of planes, and a hover truck to gather resources.

But wait. Look closer and you'll note an anime-styled robot towering over the small vehicles. It's a detailed 3D polygonal model with fluid idle animations. Its walking animation varies depending on his weight and speed. It's not just some *über*-unit—it's the crux of *Metal Fatigue*, a game about "combots," modular robots built from mixed and matched components.

Any given combot is a combination of legs, a torso, and two arms, which combine their attributes to define the unit. For instance, steady legs improve weapons accuracy, jump jets allow the unit to leap to distant points and recon legs move the combot faster. The arms are responsible for the bulk of offensive and defensive capabilities. Powershields, Gatling arms, katana arms, sawblades, long range sniper rifles and electrogrips are some of the available options. As a player progresses through the game's campaigns, new components become available to build better units. In addition, players can salvage pieces that have fallen from defeated enemies and either use them immediately or research them to build more.



▲ These combots are ready for action



▶ This looks vaguely familiar...

Zono has written distinct animations not just for each component's attack, but also for the effects of being hit by different weapons. For instance, when a combot gets grabbed with an electrogrip, its reaction is different from when it's been smacked in the chest with a missile. "We didn't want things just blowing up. We want it to look like *Tekken*," says Hough. After watching a combot with a katana arm whack away at an opponent's shield before dismembering him, it's clear that this isn't your ordinary real-time strategy game. This touch of anime isn't just cosmetic.

Each of the game's scenarios take place on three planes: surface, orbit and underground. Much like *Master of Magic*'s Arcanus and Myrror, these three planes are all interconnected. Drill trucks can carve out tunnels below the surface, where units are safe from the giant combots. Meanwhile, orbital platforms overhead offer only limited building space, but solar panels gather more energy up there. Aircraft and combots with jet packs will be able to fly to the orbital level, but other units will have to be beamed between teleport pads.

With the maps expanding above and below, players will have to adjust to a new dimension. "New players will want to play it like a regular real-time strategy game, but the different levels might be a rude awakening," says Hough, explaining one of his early multiplayer games in the office. "I was getting my butt kicked on the surface, but I was able to build up in orbit and then swoop down when he didn't expect it." The toolbar along the side of the screen can be configured to show mini maps of all three planes, complete with unit indicators and combat warnings. A click of the mouse will instantly shift the main view to any level.

The basic resource model in *Metal Fatigue* is the megajoule, earned by converting power from lava pools and solar panels. Bases will have a manpower requirement, similar to farms in *Warcraft*, and crews are required for each combot. Crews gain experience between missions, so you'll want to protect them even if their combot is destroyed, in which case they become frail tiny units just begging to be squashed.

Metal Fatigue's AI is in the hands of Mark Baldwin, a veteran AI designer known for QQP's *Perfect General* and the venerable *Empire* games. Baldwin is composing various AIs as distinct personalities. The AI divides its strategy into "projects," such as grabbing the nearest lava pool, attacking a player's defenses, or securing the highest point on the map. These projects will then be assigned varying priorities depending on what technology the computer has and also in response to what the other players are doing.

You'll be able to put *Metal Fatigue* through its stress tests next Spring. *–Tom Chick*

Metal Fatigue • Psygnosis • Windows 95

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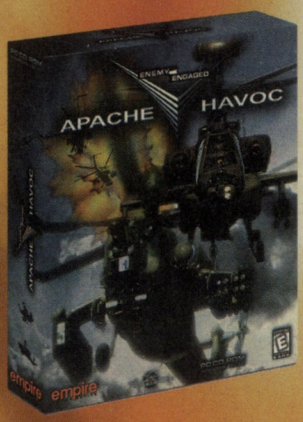
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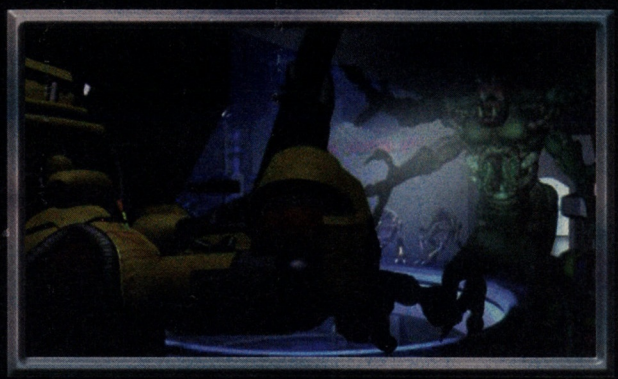
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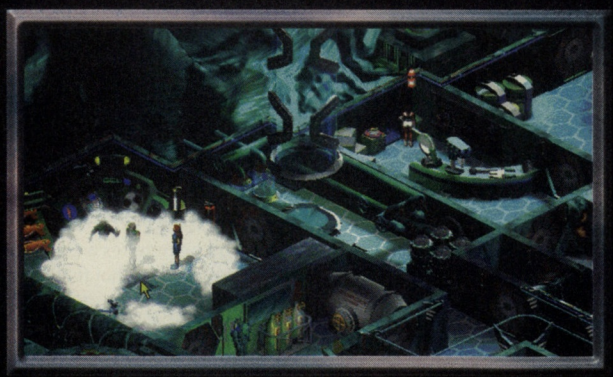


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Buying a Gaming PC

An entry-level guide to gaming hardware terms

So you've decided you need a game machine. That machine you bought at the local mall just isn't cutting it compared to today's 3D accelerated marvels. This article is geared toward new users who aren't familiar with all of the terminology of gaming hardware. It's beyond the scope of the article to recommend specific machines or pieces of hardware, but may provide guidance for those befuddled by our usual selection of hardware reviews. Keep in mind that it's an entry-level guide; if you're well versed in hardware, know your SCSI from your UltraDMA, and have memorized your monitor's refresh rate, you may want to move on to the next article.

In your search for a gaming PC, the best place to start is the game boxes themselves. Read the boxes, paying careful attention to the "Requirements" for each game. If you find titles you're particularly interested in trying, you'll want to make sure you have a machine that's *more* powerful than what's specified as being required to play the game.

Once you've determined that every game requires a God-like machine that only Bill Gates could possibly afford, you're ready to start figuring out what features are most important for gaming.

Machine Components

Processor

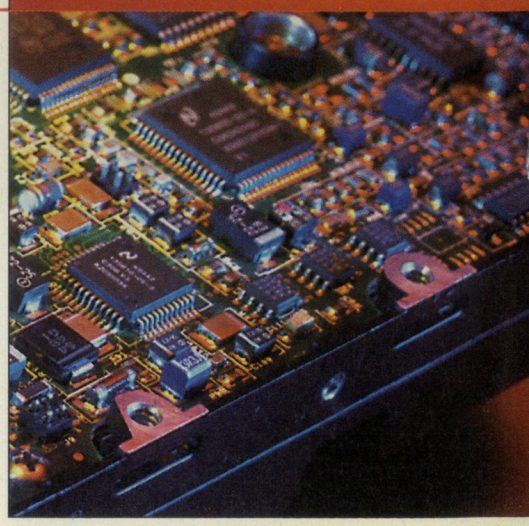
The processor, or CPU, is usually described as the brain of your computer. It is where all of the magic happens. It is the most important part of your entire system, and usually it's one of the most expensive.

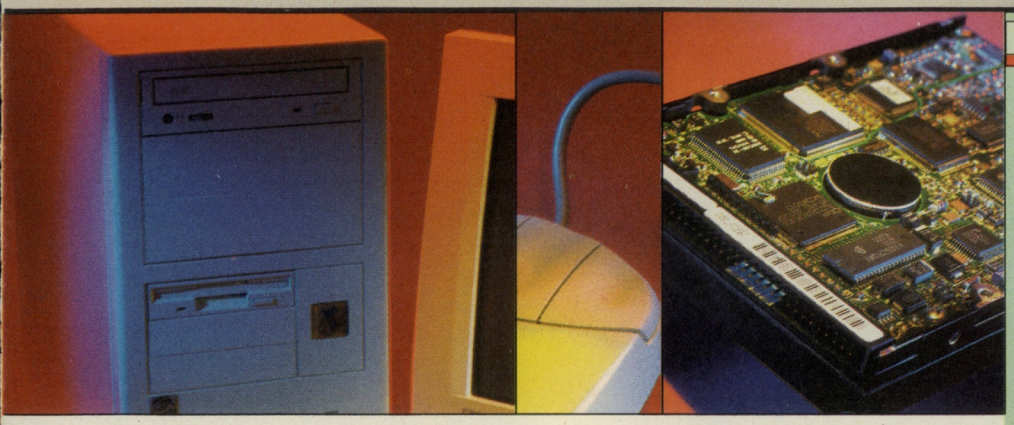
Thanks to their ubiquitous (and annoying) commercials, most people have also heard of Intel Pentium and Pentium II processors. If you're purchasing a new system, you may be surprised to find alternatives. Many low-cost systems use processors from companies named Cyrix and AMD. AMD, in particular, has been vigorous in upgrading and improving its products, and its latest line of CPUs, the K6-2, is worth looking at as the heart of an entry-level game machine.

Bottom Line: It's hard not to recommend true Intel Pentium II processors for a gaming machine. Intel has also introduced its Celeron line of less expensive Pentium II-class CPUs; these are worth looking into if money is tight. AMD has narrowed the lead with their K6 processor with special enhancements for 3D graphics, but it's still not clear how much support that feature will get from software companies. The basic rule of thumb is to buy the fastest processor you can afford.

Memory

Don't even consider less than 32 megabytes (MB) of RAM for a gaming machine. 64MB is





even better, and many newer high-end systems come with a whopping 128MB. The additional memory is likely to be less expensive if you include it in your initial purchase, but it's usually pretty easy to add more at a later time—an exception would be systems that don't have empty memory slots.

Bottom Line: If you're looking to save a bit of money, you can go with 32MB of RAM, but you won't be nearly as happy as you would be if you bought a system with 64MB. Go for the extra memory, especially if you like 3D action games or flight simulators.

Hard drive

Hard drives are where you store all of your permanent data, plus the programs themselves. Every program you use takes up hard drive space, from Windows itself to Microsoft *Office* to every single game in existence. So while the type or size of the hard drive doesn't directly affect your game playing, a larger drive allows you to store more games on your machine at one time, thereby making you much happier.

Bottom Line: There's one rule of thumb with hard drives—whatever size you select, it will not be big enough. Get the biggest one available—something bigger than 4GB. Don't sweat the details of transfer speeds, access times, and what not that the ads ballyhoo; look for the biggest drive for your dollar.

Monitor

Monitors are overpriced but absolutely crucial to you enjoyment of your computer. Unless you order a system from a national vendor, like Dell or Gateway, the cost of a monitor usually isn't factored into the price of a system. Your best bet in that case is to browse a store that has multiple displays available and decide for yourself which one looks best. You'll be staring at it a lot.

Monitors are usually identified by resolution and refresh rate, which is the number of times the monitor updates its picture per second. Higher is better in both cases. They're also identified by their dot pitch, which is the distance between the pixels, or dots of light, that make up the display. Most monitors have at most a .28mm dot pitch—any higher and the picture tends to look fuzzy.

Bottom Line: It's not a critical gaming component at the moment, but as games move to higher resolutions, a 17-inch monitor will almost be required. A bigger screen will allow higher resolution displays without details getting too small.

Keyboard & mouse

Keyboards and mice are relatively cheap, so take whatever is offered as it can be replaced at a later time. Games don't take advantage of any special keyboards, though some support the extra buttons on certain Logitech mice.

Bottom Line: Go with whatever they give you and upgrade later. It's important, though, to be comfortable with your mouse. You'll be using it every day.

Modem

Your vehicle of choice for cruising that information superhighway known as the Internet. If you get into games, you'll eventually be interested in playing them online. A modem, which stands for MOdulator/ DEModulator, is the device that facilitates your connection to the Internet by hooking up to a phone line.

Modems are usually referred to by their speed, which is rated in kilobits per second, a measure of how fast they can pump data over your phone line. Most modems in computers sold today are at least 28.8Kbps, with many running at 56Kbps.

In the "good old days" (which weren't), the manufacturer of a modem was critical. It's less of an issue today—most modems are more alike than different. They all come with the ability to send faxes, and Windows 95 and 98 have built-in software to allow you to connect to the Internet.

Bottom Line: If there's an option for different speed modems, take the fastest one. But don't make this a determining factor in what system to buy—modems are cheap and easy to replace.

Multimedia

Multimedia is a generic term to identify soundcards and CD-ROM drives. Soundcards produce sound, and CD-ROM is the main distribution method for games (CD-ROMs look like music compact discs but store computer data instead).

CD-ROM drives are rated by their speed,

Where to buy?

Computer Stores

Stores like CompUSA or Computer City offer good selections of machines that cover a wide spectrum of performance. They allow superior comparison shopping, in particular for a more visual peripheral like a monitor or a "touchy" one like keyboard, mouse, or joystick. The staff at these stores may be well informed about their products and should be able to answer most of your questions. On the down side, these stores can be large, impersonal, and confusing, and customizing a system might prove harder than you would like.

Mail-order

Most of the major mail-order companies (Dell, Gateway, and Micron for instance) offer machines designed specifically for gamers. They tend to offer the most current machines with the best prices, and their service is usually top-notch. Shipping costs cut into your savings, but usually not more than you would pay for sales tax (although, depending on the state you live in, you may be required to pay sales tax as well, even from a company in another state). The big advantage of dealing with a direct marketer is price and performance; these companies generally deliver the best bang for the buck, with high-powered, well-tested systems for reasonable prices. Big mail-order firms usually get the latest peripherals relatively quickly, and they are equally quick to lower their prices to compete in this highly competitive business. The downside? You can't see what you're getting until you get it, tech support is variable (though usually good, it can require some lengthy phone calls), and your ability to customize your machine depends entirely on what products the vendor has on hand or is willing to get for you.

Electronics Stores

Stores like Circuit City and Best Buy are good places to get solid deals on decent machines. While you will rarely find a purist hardcore game machine at a place like this, you can usually find good prices on middle-of-the-road gear. With a couple of add-ons (usually in the area of 3D cards), you can get yourself a seriously good machine for little money. The drawbacks? Limited selection, limited help from the staff, which has to deal with everything from staplers and answering machines to PCs, and often limited ability to mix and match components.

Office Supply Stores

Your average Staples and Office Depot type stores usually offer a decent selection of name-brand products from major vendors like Compaq and Hewlett Packard. You'll be lucky to get a serious game machine at one of these stores, but you might be able to add a few parts to bring it up to spec. Keep an eye out for special deals and close-outs, though, as you can sometimes snag a great bargain on a solid system.

Warehouse Clubs

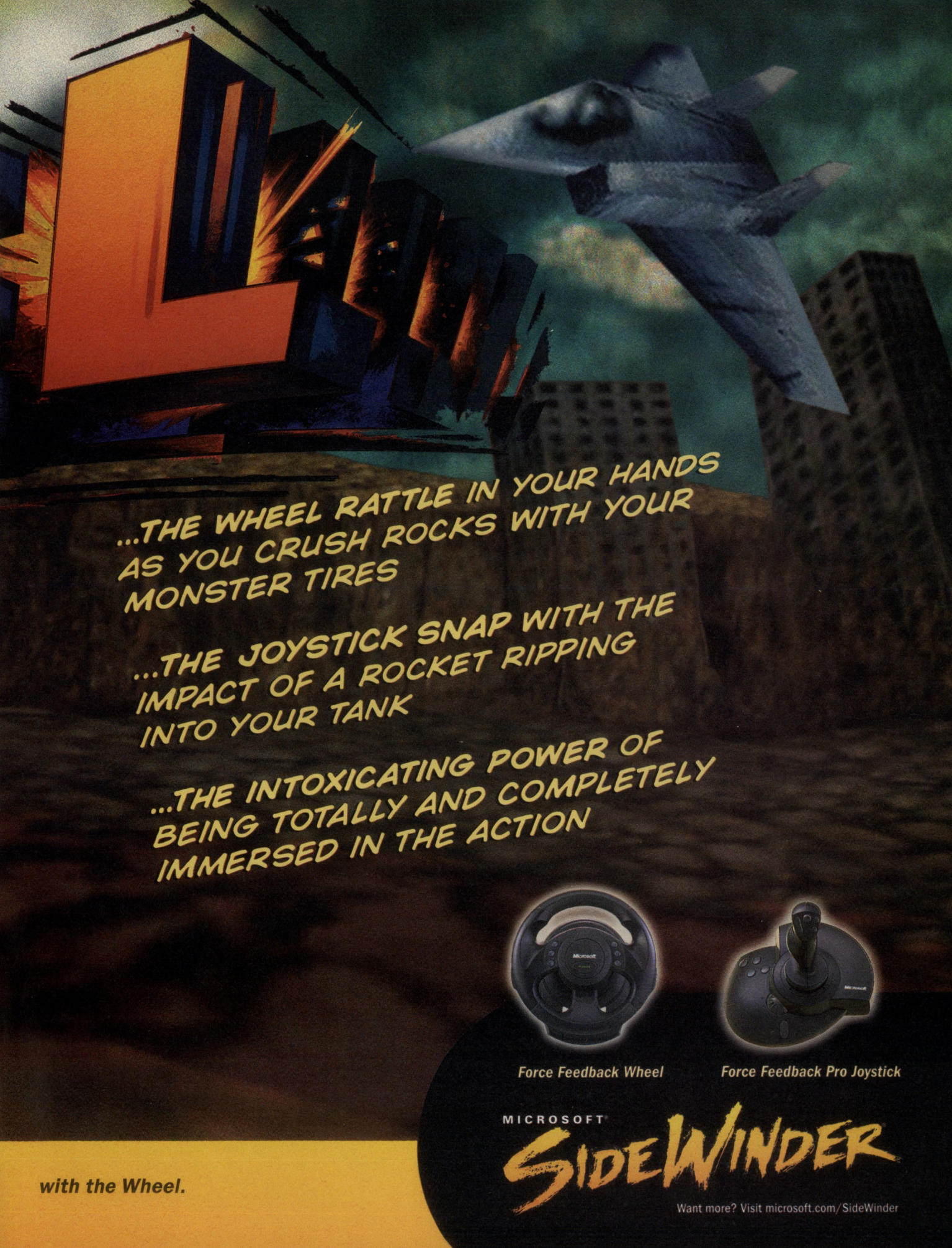
At you local Costco or Sam's Club-style store, you maybe be lucky to find a couple of last year's big name-brand computers stuck in-



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between copies of *Titanic* and cases of Mr. Pibb. If cost is your sole criteria, you can usually find the cheapest machines here; however, they may not be optimal for games, lacking expansion and the right video for serious gamers. As always, a sharp eye and knowing your options will keep you from any serious mistakes.

Local Computer Stores

Local establishments vary wildly in terms of quality and price. Beware of stores that offer machines dirt-cheap—it's possible you'll end up with parts made in a country you can't even pronounce, much less have ever heard of. Consult friends for quality local merchants. They can usually build a machine exactly to your specifications, which is a boon if you're interested in a serious gaming machine. The drawbacks? Machines from local shops will usually cost more than those from big mail-order houses, and customer support may be hard to get if you move out of the area.

Checklist

If you're in the market for a game machine, here's a quick look at the hardware you should be considering. Yes, these are all incredibly powerful machines, but games are notorious for pushing your computer to the limit. For more detailed explanations of what many of these features mean, consult the main text in the article.

Ultimate

Processor: Intel Pentium II
Processor Speed: 400MHz or higher
RAM: 128MB or higher
Hard Drive: 12GB or higher
Monitor: 19 inch or bigger
Modem: 56K
CD-ROM: 32X or higher
Sound: PCI 3D Sound Card with wavetable
Video: 2D/3D combination card plus dedicated 3D card

Mid-Range

Processor: Intel Pentium II
Processor Speed: 266MHz or higher
RAM: 64MB or higher
Hard Drive: 8GB or higher
Monitor: 17 inch or bigger
Modem: 56K
CD-ROM: 16X or higher
Sound: PCI sound card with wavetable
Video: 2D/3D combination card

Budget

Processor: Intel Pentium, Intel Celeron, or AMD K6-2
Processor Speed: 200MHz or higher
RAM: 32MB or higher
Hard Drive: 4GB or higher
Monitor: 15 inch or bigger
Modem: 33.6K
CD-ROM: 8X or higher
Sound: 16-bit ISA sound card
Video: 2D/3D combination card



with an X that denotes the number of times faster the CD spins than it does in a standard music CD. Standard speeds include 12X, 16X, 24X and 32X, and as usual the higher the number, the faster the CD-ROM—sort of. Most CD-ROM drives can't deliver their rated speed in normal operations; expect maybe 80% of the stated speed as an average. Still, anything above a 8X is fast enough for today's games, and probably will be for a while.

There used to be a lot of buyer confusion over which sound card to buy, with a near requirement for something called Sound Blaster compatibility, but Windows 95 and 98 have eliminated much of the problems associated with these devices. There are, however, options you should consider. Older sound cards were almost exclusively ISA bus cards; they mated with your computer through the traditional ISA "bus" (in essence, the main information pathway between the components inside your computer), a standard that dates from the dawn of the PC. Newer sound cards are available as PCI cards, which interface with the computer via the PCI bus, a faster way of connecting to the computer. PCI cards can improve the performance of some games. If you're buying a new machine, ask the person if you're getting a PCI or ISA sound card.

Another feature to look for in a sound card is wavetable sound, which allows better-sounding music. A wavetable is a stored digital representation of a sound; rather than synthesizing or manufacturing a sound, your sound card will trigger the digital waveform instead, which results in clearer, more faithful sound reproduction. There's also 3D positional audio, which simulates sound coming from all around you, while other cards have built in Dolby Surround, just like in the movie theater. There are almost no games that require any of these features, but many are enhanced by their presence. Not all sound cards have all of these features, so shop carefully.

Bottom Line: Make sure you get a 12X CD-ROM or higher, and that the machine you're looking at has a PCI sound card with wavetable. Newer cards, like the Turtle Beach Montego or Sound Blaster Live Value can be had for under $100.

3D Acceleration

The latest revolution to hit PC gaming hardware has been the advent of specialized accelerator cards to handle 3D graphics (they "accelerate" the speed of 3D graphics on your computer by taking much of the work away from your CPU). The constant evolution of technology has led to a near-unprecedented amount of buyer confusion.

There are currently two types of 3D accelerator cards, dedicated and combination. Examples of dedicated cards include those based on the 3Dfx Voodoo and Voodoo2 and NEC PowerVR chipsets. These cards provide no regular Windows functions, so you'll need another video card to handle your regular non-3D accelerated software. The dedicated cards plug into your machine via a PCI slot and connect to your current video card via some sort of cable (or, in the case of the PowerVR, they magically work with no connection other than the computer's internal data pathways). When you factor in the cost of the 2D card you'll also need, you'll usually find that a dedicated 3D card is usually more expensive than a combination card that does both 2D and 3D operations. However, their specialization usually lead to superior 3D performance.

Examples of 2D/3D combination cards include those with chipsets provided by nVIDIA with their RIVA line, Intel with their i740, Rendition with the Vérité, and Matrox with the G200. They provide standard Windows display functions (accelerating Windows functions, such as drawing boxes, as well as 3D games) and are usually relatively inexpensive. Basically, the trade-off with a combo card is simple. You get convenience (one card, one slot, 2D and 3D support), but 3D performance is usually less stellar than that from a stand-alone 3D card.

It doesn't matter how fast your card is if there's no software that supports it, and games needs to be specially created to take advantage of a 3D accelerator card. There are standardized ways for programmers to talk to any 3D card, usually in the form of what are called APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). Examples of 3D APIs include a few more terms you've probably heard thrown around: Direct3D,

OpenGL and Glide. Direct3D is part of Microsoft's DirectX, and every consumer 3D card supports most of its features. Glide is a 3Dfx-specific API, and is really a subset of the heavy-hitter of the bunch, the more high-end workstation-oriented OpenGL. More often than not, game boxes with the 3Dfx logo on them support Glide. *Quake* and *Quake II*, however, support 3D acceleration via a version of OpenGL that works with most but not all 3D accelerators.

Bottom Line: Not all 3D accelerators are created equal. The fastest on the market are the dedicated 3Dfx Voodoo2 accelerators, followed closely by the combination cards based on the Riva TNT and the Voodoo Banshee. Your best bet for deciding which card to purchase is to look at some of the games on the shelves and read their requirements carefully. See which chipsets they support—you'll find the 3Dfx cards have the most support, but most games, and all 3D cards, support Direct3D as well.

Miscellaneous

Other game-centric options for your machine include fancy speakers and joysticks. Regarding speakers, we all have entirely different concepts what constitutes great sound, so we'll leave it up to your to decide what your needs are, and how you can fill them.

Joysticks kind of fall under the same umbrella. There are many joysticks, from complex flight controllers to gamepads. Each has a specific purpose, and some are best for certain types of games than others. Gamepads typically work best for action and sports games, while analog controllers are designed for flight games. Steering wheels obviously work best with racing games (duh). There are even joysticks and wheels that vibrate when the software tells them too—these special (and expensive) devices are called force-feedback controllers, and they're designed to help immerse you in the experience by helping you "feel" the game.

Bottom Line: A gamer needs a good set of speakers, a joystick *and* a gamepad. Electronics stores will usually let you sample speakers, so find the ones that suit both your wallet and your ear. For joysticks, also go to your local store and sample their selection. Buy the ones that feel most comfortable in your hands.

It's a wrap

Buying a PC today is considerably less painful than it used to be a mere 2-3 years ago. The hardware is more sophisticated and works better with Windows 95 and 98, and there are fewer problems with software.

Still, it's a jungle out there! It's all too easy to spend more than you need, or wind up with less than you want. That said, hopefully we've given you enough information to make more informed buying decisions. Happy shopping.
–Steve Bauman

This article is excerpted from a special issue of the PC Game Guide titled "Getting Started With Computer Games." It is available on finer newsstands throughout the land.

Stop the Madness!

Four new controllers continue the trend toward hyper-complexity



Cyclone 3D

Magnum 6

Forget impeaching the president—there's an even more pressing issue facing the nation (pun intended). There's been an unprecedented proliferation of extraneous buttons and gizmos sprouting on our nation's controllers, and God help us if designers start to develop with them specifically in mind.

These "next-generation" controllers are designed to put more control (pun also intended) at the gamer's fingertips; however, they all share one fatal flaw—operating them becomes such a complex endeavor that it reaches a point where the amount of time learning the controller's ins and outs and programming it to perfection would be better spent simply practicing the game and playing it the way the designers intended. This month, we'll look at four controllers spouting excessive buttonage.

Over-InterAction

The controllers from InterAct are perhaps the biggest offenders in the "more is better" category. Their Cyclone 3D features a whopping 17 buttons for game use, supporting 34 programmable functions, a twisting handle and a four-way hat. It also slices, dices, gives free back rubs and plugs into your keyboard.

With the included software, you can map keyboard functions to any of the joystick's buttons. In the case of the ones on the base of the stick, it's hard to understand how these tiny unlabeled buttons would be superior to any grouping of keys on the keyboard. The stick itself feels flimsy, with low-quality and poorly textured plastics and mushy button action. Despite the problems with the base buttons, the handle itself is decently designed, with a comfortable rubber inset reducing slipping.

Overall, though, it's hard to understand the appeal of the Cyclone 3D. As with every other controller in existence it works, but it's not even close to being one of the top dogs in this ultra-competitive market.

On a slightly simpler note, InterAct's Magnum 6 controller also looks like it has too many buttons; however, the six buttons on the base merely mirror the functions on the stick itself. Another switch allows you to select between four-buttons with hat or six buttons without, a legacy of the stick being backward



Cyborg Stick

Cyborg Pad

compatible with pure DOS games.

Overall, the stick feels just as flimsy as the Cyclone 3D, with coarse throttle action, buttons that are made from a cheap-feeling plastic, and mirrored base buttons that are too small and too closely spaced together to be particularly useful. As with the Cyclone 3D, its symmetrical design makes it useful for lefties as well as righties.

With other more advanced controllers existing on the market, it's hard to make a case for the Magnum 6.

Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto

Saitek made quite a splash with the introduction of the X36 flight simulation control system. Offering lots of subtle style and uncommonly high build-quality (the plastics used on the unit are fantastic in their texture and feel), it quickly developed a following among the simulation cognoscenti. Their new line of controllers, the Cyborg series, throws all the subtlety out the door. They opt for a freakish post-nuclear look that scores big-time style points, but both end up with flaws brought about by their visual design. Looks ain't everything.

The Cyborg Pad may redefine weird. The controller, which resembles a post-industrial metallic owl with a black eye, features an ungodly number of buttons, switches, d-pads, analog sticks, flippers and rubber hand rest thingees. Available in regular and USB versions, Saitek describes it as the "pad for the adult PC gamer," but it's hard not to be a bit embarrassed by the boldness of its design. It's more teenage wasteland than adult contemporary.

The digital gamepad features three programmable modes: arcade, fly and drive. It features a d-pad, which doubles as a hat, and an analogue mini-joystick *a la* the Nintendo 64. While there's little doubt it's a striking piece of work, it concedes style to functionality. The buttons on the face of the unit are too small and awkwardly placed, the flippers, which default as the primary buttons, are flimsy and feel like they could snap off at a moment's notice, the throttle on the back is inconvenient, and the whole thing is just unwieldy.

On the other hand, much of the weirdness of Saitek's Cyborg Stick is solely related to its appearance. In practice, it's actually a fairly standard joystick, albeit one that's can be configured for use by lefties or righties. It comes with a hex tool that actually allows you to take portions of the stick apart and adjust them for comfort. This is a wonderful feature, and others should consider some sort of implementation for their own products.

While the trigger button is perfectly placed and nicely weighed, there's some concern it could be easily broken during an intense gaming session (it's kind of hovering in mid-air, as opposed to being flush against the stick as in most other designs). The three buttons usually operated by your thumb are grouped so closely together that you can occasionally hit the wrong one in the heat of battle. The throttle features an unusual design, but in use it proves able, with a solid high-tension feeling. Like the Magnum 3D, and innovated by Microsoft in their Sidewinder line of controllers, the handle can be twisted and used as a rudder or turret control in a big robot game.

Those into programming their stick should be ecstatic to know there are 24 actions you can assign to the 16 buttons (some can be shifted). The software, which is shared across the entire Saitek line, is similar to that packaged with Microsoft's Sidewinder line of controllers. It's easy to use and features a point-and-click interface.

Overall, the Cyborg stick is a respectable controller, albeit one with a couple of dings over its ergonomics and some concern over its durability.

Are we wrong?

We'll concede that we may not understand the market on the issue of controllers. Maybe gamers really do want controllers with all of these controls, buttons and programmability. Maybe the simple design of a CH Flightstick is a thing of the past. Hell, even the simple ergonomics and comfort of the Microsoft Sidewinder Gamepad seem downright quaint compared to some of these complex devices.

But in our quest for "mastering" our games, have we assumed that complex is necessarily better, that more buttons equals more immersion because touching that keyboard pulls you out of the game? Bah, who knows? We're just controller luddites around here, and these controllers just have too damn many buttons. *–Steve Bauman*

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The Rise of Rome

A Roman centurion's dream

What exactly makes a good expansion pack for a game? Are there specific ingredients that make up a good package, specifically for a real-time strategy title? Certainly, an ideal expansion should try to address any shortcomings of the original game (at least the ones that are not too deeply imbedded in the design). It should also try to add to, expand on, or take the basic play into new directions by doing things such as adding new units, buildings, missions/campaigns, maps, and, when possible, interface/structure enhancements. It also helps congruity if the story structure is as good and as seamlessly integrated as the original. Of course, it should also strive to come out in a timely fashion. It doesn't bode well if you have to dig the original game out of the bottom of a clearance bin.

Ensemble Studios must have been paying attention to those Expansions 101 classes, as they nail nearly every aspect of what makes a good add-on in their *Age of Empires* expansion *The Rise of Rome*. It offers all the basic enhancements: new civilizations, units, buildings, technologies, maps, and four new campaigns. As the title suggests, the add-on centers around the legendary expansion of the Roman Empire from its rise to its role as a ruling power, to its enemies and their struggle to survive the might of this powerful empire.

The add-on does need the original game to run, but *Rise of Rome* updates *Age of Empires* to the latest 1.0b patch. The five new units are nice; the new Scythe chariots seemed the deadliest of the lot. The new technologies include martyrdom, medicine, tower shield, and logistics. Worth noting is that logistics makes each barracks unit count as half toward your population total. Since the 1.0b patch allows multiplayer games to modify the maximum number of units per a civilization, this serves as a real boon to players frustrated with the normal 50 unit limit.

Rise of Rome also offers enhancements in both interface and general design. Buildings can now queue the production of units. A more subtle change is that the sound cues have been enhanced; for instance, you now receive a distinct sound warning when farm production has expired. *Rise of Rome* also allows you to cycle directly to the location of the last five sound cues (like attacks) by pressing the <Home> key.

The AI is also significantly improved. The tedious problem involving bottlenecks is almost completely gone, and units no longer stop and gyrate in some bizarre waltz when large numbers of them are directed through a small gateway or path. The AI for chopping wood and similar chore commands has also improved. Unlike the original, you rarely find groups of woodsmen standing idle (probably snickering at that bunch doing the bizarre gyrating waltz at the gate) when a grove of trees is just a few paces away. In fact, they will actually navigate around obstructions to continue their job. Strangely, other times some members of these same groups, when shifting to a new location, will abruptly halt work while the rest of their group works on. In addition, the pathfinding for ships still seems to suffer from the "I canna do't capt'n" syndrome; it's not uncommon to find fishing boats stuck on the shoreline in the tight channel passages.

While *Rise of Rome* introduces four new civilizations and four new campaigns, they seem to all revolve *very* closely around the Roman Empire. It's a bit disappointing to discover that three of the campaigns are played as Romans at various stages of the Roman Empire's growth, but only one of the campaigns allow you to try your hand with any of the three other races—Carthaginian, Macedonian, or Palmyran. Players wanting to explore the full depth of these additional races will likely have to rely on multiplayer.

The multiplayer experience has been improved in several areas. Of course, the 1.0b patch allows players to set the maximum number of units for a civilization. Players also have a new selection of huge maps with new terrain types to explore. In addition to the four new civilizations, players can also select a random civilization in multiplayer games. Which of the 16 civilizations you will be is not known till the game starts.

A common comment among gamers regarding *Age of Empires* was the lack of the Roman civilization—this add-on addresses that concern. *The Rise of Rome* is definitely a quality addition to the *Age of Empire* series. While nothing jumps out as an outstanding improvement over the original, the package is solid and well thought out. If you enjoyed *Age of Empires*, *Rise of Rome* will put fresh blood on your sword. *–David Finn*







[clockwise from upper left] If only Caesar had done as well with the Senate...; The battle for Britain begins!; A Roman military parade

★★★★☆

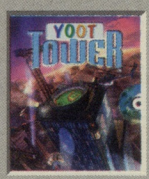
Age of Empires: The Rise of Rome
Microsoft • www.microsoft.com
Requirements: Age of Empires • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem



Tokyo

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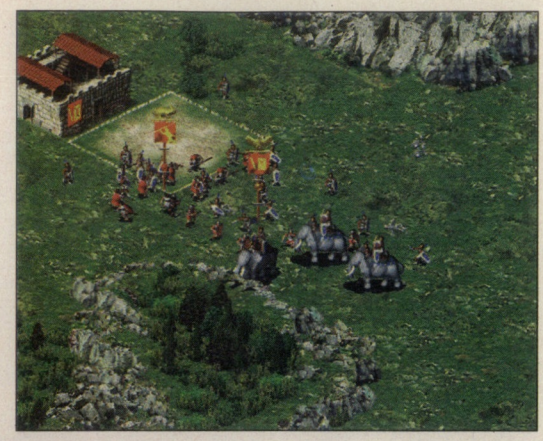


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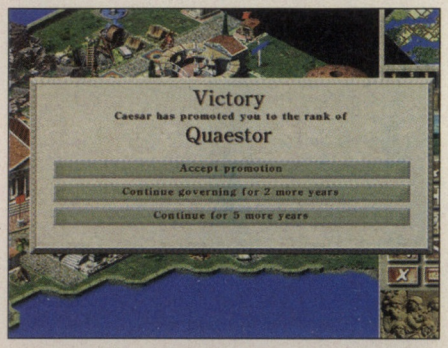


A battle rages near the legion's fort; it is not going well for the Romans

For the aspiring Pompey or Marc Antony, the *Caesar* series has held a continuing fascination. The evolution of *Caesar III* is similar to *Civilization II*, with the cumulative effect of the improvements over past entries resulting in a much more engaging, enjoyable, and yes, addictive game. The primary improvements come in three areas: graphics; economic, religious, political, and social models; and in consolidating almost all activities onto a single map. Because of the latter, players can spend more time concentrating on creating the necessary infrastructure required for a functioning Roman city. Compared to *Caesar II*, the emphasis is on economics and not military activity, something some players may not appreciate. The multiple demands for growth, current revenue, and risk management (to include the wrath of the gods!) will keep even the most brilliant and flexible governor glued to the monitor until the tapers have burned down.



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Victory! This is what all the pain, struggle, and sleep depravation are for



Preparing to export raw materials. Not as good as finished products, but anything to get started

Some features of *Caesar III* need to be stated clearly—this is a single-player game and there are no difficulty settings. Players can not "dumb down" certain game features to let themselves get an easier start. Proper management of the time settings is important, or else the game can be rather lengthy, and even long, at the upper levels. The message system is helpful, but at the upper levels can be difficult to keep up with. The graphics are greatly improved over the other games in the series, and are communicate information crucial to gameplay.

At the macro level, there are numerous issues the aspiring governor must address. Ensuring an adequate food supply is critical because without food you get no immigrants, thus no city. Establishing industries, infrastructure and proper export/import channels to maximize income are vital to success. Without a steady flow of cash the other aspects of city development will not happen. The visual feedback created by building these facilities reinforces a player's sense of accomplishment.

Establishing the proper security environment is also enjoyably represented. In low-threat provinces, players need only make enough prefects (police stations), but in militarily threatened areas players must create and maintain mobile and fixed defenses. Without security there are no economics as the enemy has a nasty habit of attempting to level player's cities. At the earlier levels, barbarians are poorly organized and motivated, and don't present much of a threat. However, at the higher levels, players will find enemies like the Carthaginians a "significant emotional event." Creating and managing legions is an important skill, and also a lot of fun. The military tends to suck away a large portion of the budget, making a thriving economy even more important.

At the micro level, players will find themselves constantly challenged in the battle for scarce resources. A key to city (and personal) survival is early economic development. This risks fire, famine and falling buildings, but manufacturing of all sorts provides the majority of income. This can lead to some player frustration early in the game due to fire, maintenance and disease. The point at which your city turns the corner and becomes a paying concern gives a great shot of satisfaction, and players can then turn their attention towards making the myriad improvements required to expand the population and tax base.

Within the city there are several features that ease play and/or increase player engagement. An excellent feature is the ability to right click for information on almost any citizen or structure. This is often a key source which can assist players in either staving off problems or improving the situation. Advisors are also improved from earlier versions. The labor advisor permits setting priorities, thus putting off the dreaded cry of "more plebes needed," at least in key areas. Trade and manufacturing can be manipulated in a similar way, and hills have been added, which adds another dimension to city planning.

Caesar III puts together several different moving pieces into an attractive, challenging, and addictive package. Balancing the competing demands for resources, taxation, security, development, and economic activity will stress the skills of the most skillful strategy gamers. The game is economically oriented, but there is enough military play to keep the aspiring centurions among the crowd interested. Players willing to make the investment in time will be rewarded with a great sense of accomplishment on their march to assume the imperial purple. Ave Caesar! *–Richard A. Lechowich*

★★★★☆

Caesar III

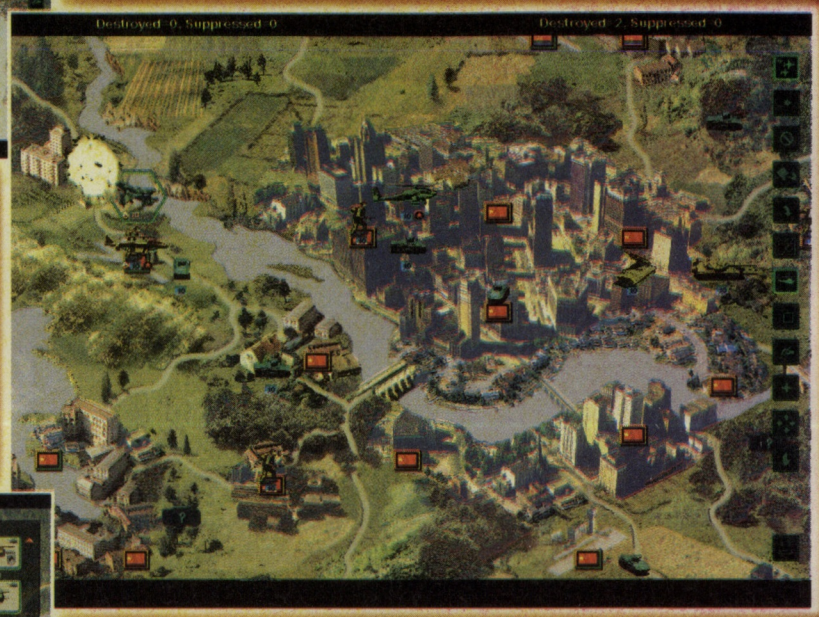
Sierra • www.sierra.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

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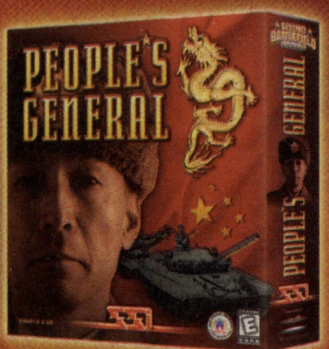
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Axis & Allies

You've waited years for the PC version, now wait for the patch

Axis & Allies, the boardgame, is an abstract take on WWII that starts roughly along the battlelines of early 1942. Though simplistic compared to a full-fledged wargame, it manages to capture the feel and major trends of the last "good war." As *Panzer General* is to tactical combat with its fun and fast play, *Axis & Allies* is its counterpart with grand strategic operations. Since its release roughly 14 years ago the game has amassed a following second to few other boardgames.

Surprisingly, this version of the game is the first (legal) computer port of the boardgame. To their credit they have faithfully captured the flavor of the boardgame, mixed in some multimedia flash, and produced a product that retains all the fun and charm of the original game. Unfortunately, this new child is so riddled with bugs, rules violations and AI problems that many will want to bypass it .

The game's presentation is bold, colorful and in keeping with the boardgame. The unit pieces have been given the look of pewter miniatures. The immediate map area is large enough to be functional for most nations' operations and can be zoomed out for a complete view of the world. Black and white period footage as well as animated cinematics highlight world and combat events. The expected sound effects of exploding shells, diving planes and rushing tanks are delivered on cue. A nice touch is a newspaper style recap at the end of each round that tracks each nation's progress through the game.

The computer game defaults to a new set of rules, the third edition. The two most affecting play are that Western Canada no longer borders on the Atlantic ocean, which adds additional movement cost to shifting units to England or Europe, and naval units may now be placed in an enemy occupied sea zone, making possible some interesting blockading operations. Players may revert to the standard 2nd edition rules at their choosing. In addition, many popular "house variants" may be also be selected. One of the more popular, battleships being able to withstand two points of damage, is available.

Through bugs or oversight, however, there are critical rules violations in this version of the game. The most serious is that units destroyed by battleship bombardment during an amphibious assault are immediately removed from play and not allowed a chance for return fire. Passage through the Panama and Suez canals is possible for naval units regardless of ownership of the surrounding territories. Fighters may be prohibited from entering some combat situations if their intended landing zone is dependent on a carrier moving into range during the turn's latter non-combat movement phase.

The continued list of significant problems is long. Carriers that engage in naval combat may not be able to land planes later in the turn. AI controlled planes inexplicably park in an ocean zone and sit there for the rest of the game. The U.S. and Japan will frequently purchase large numbers of submarines that are never placed into play. Rockets developed through weapons research may not be placed in territories with AA guns. Network and Internet support is buggy, making games nearly impossible to finish without frequent crashes, booting of players or misplacement of game units.

Experienced players will decry the AI as being far too soft, but it's strong enough to challenge most novice and casual players. The program does a fair job of employing conventional opening strategies (yes, just like chess) and will coordinate the forces of aligned countries well. It actually plays stronger as the Axis. Given the Allies, the game's aggressiveness seems dependent on the U.S.S.R's success with capturing Norway on the first turn. The biggest snag with the AI is its seemingly inability to aggressively play the United States; instead, it confusingly shuffles units across Canada and the U.S.

Hasbro is aware of these problems and a patch is on the way. Fortunately almost all of these problems can be fixed if Hasbro continues to support the game. If addressed, *Axis & Allies* has the potential to reach the fame and popularity of its boardgame parent. For now though, it's just another rushed release.
–Chuck Klimushyn

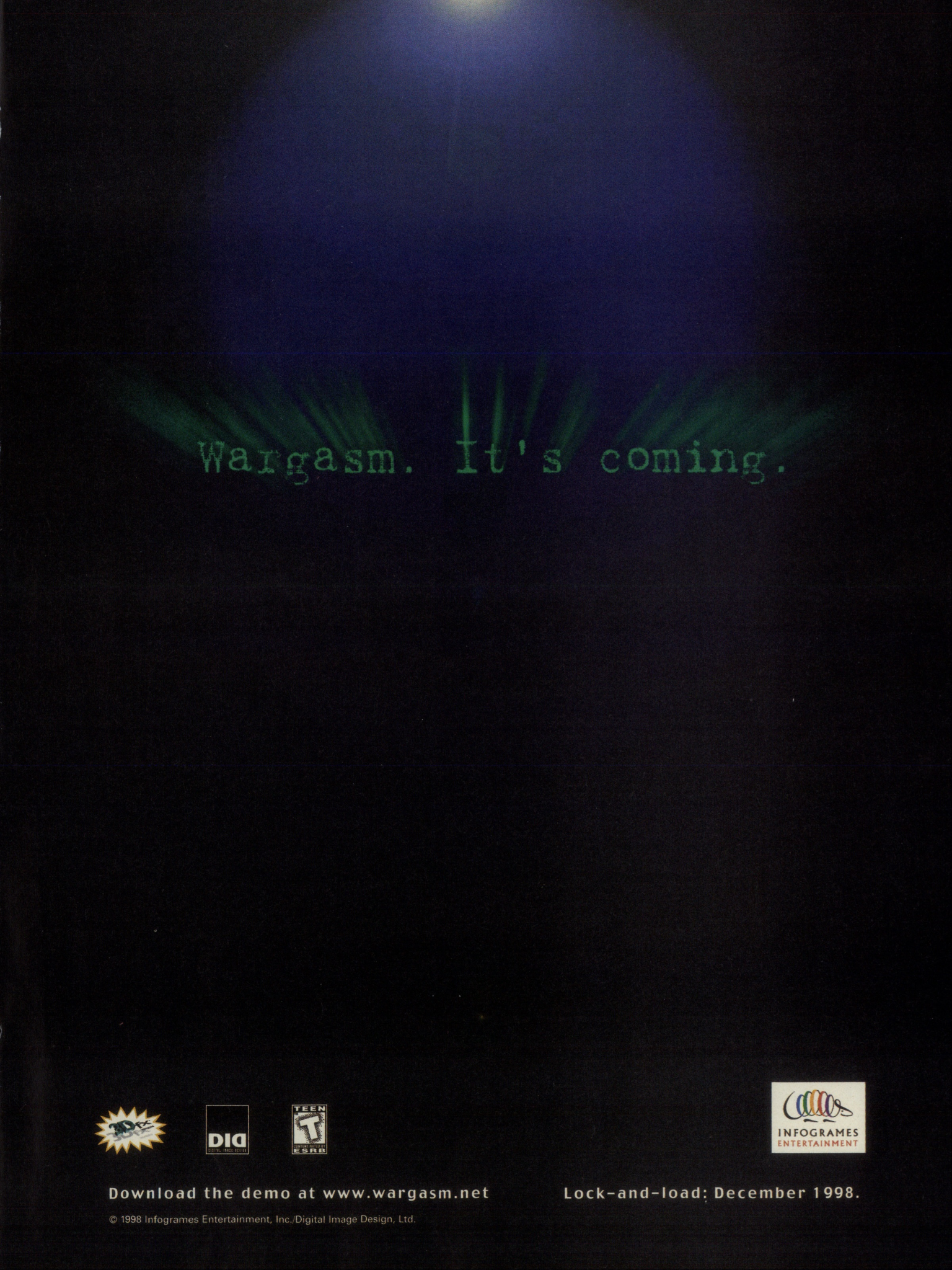


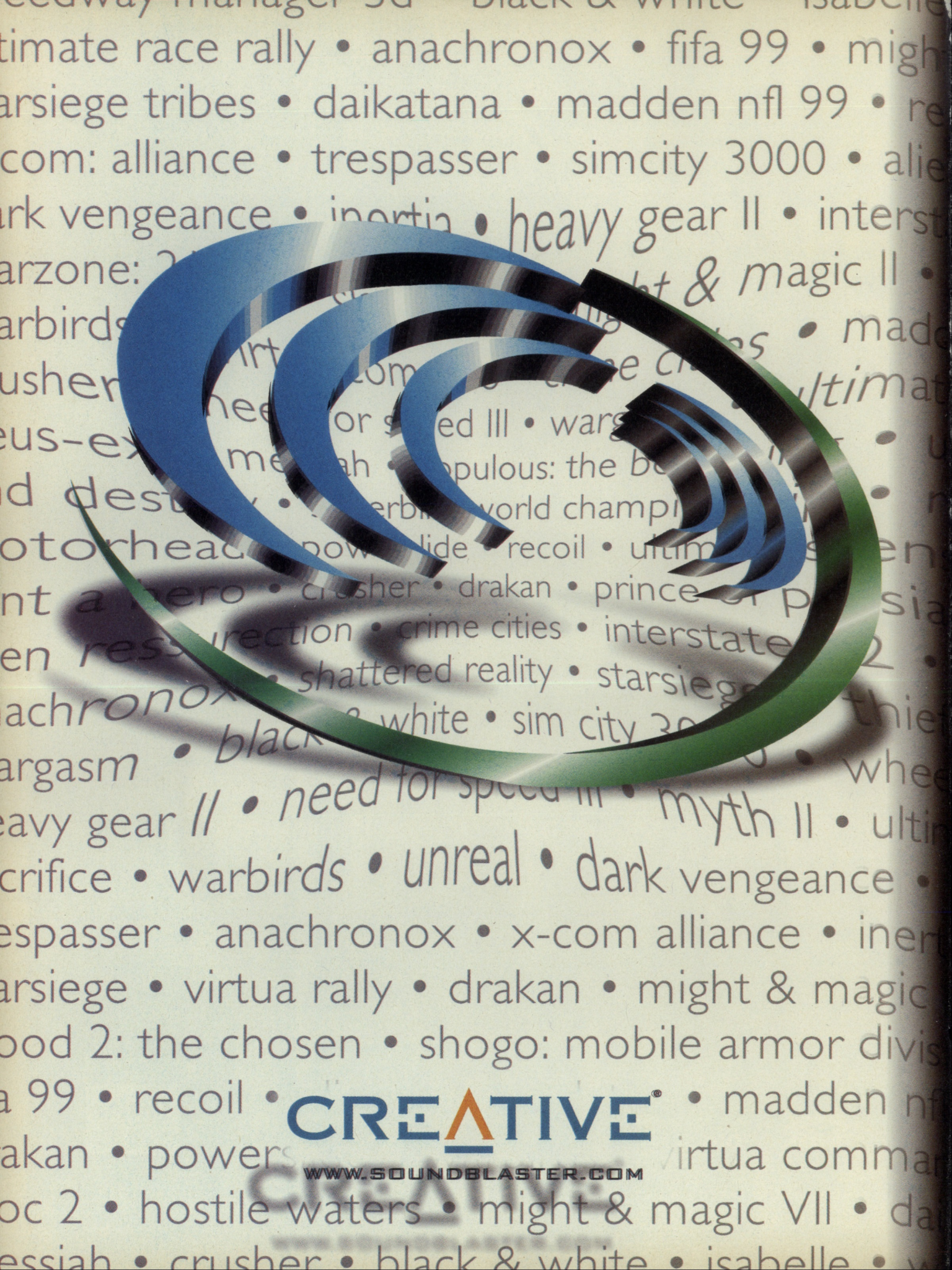
[clockwise from upper left] The playing pieces have been given the look of fine pewter miniatures; Naval bombardment was one of the rules that got messed up; The interface is simple and functional

★★½☆☆

Axis & Allies

Hasbro Interactive • www.hasbrointeractive.com
Requirements: Windows 95 or 98, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Mutliplayer: 2-5 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial, same machine


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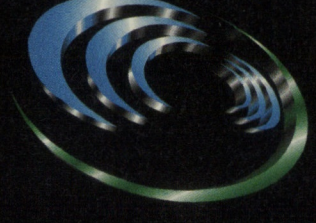


It's a dark cave. Inside your head, you hear your heart pounding.
Damp **echoes** resonate from the slow **drip** of water. A low **rumble**.
Click — a gun is being cocked to your right.
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Knights & Merchants

Fun and fascination squashed by tedium and frustration

Knights & Merchants is a strategy game set in a quasi-medieval fictional world. There is no magic, nor are there any mythical critters, just the types of humans you'd expect to populate such a world: serfs, skilled labor, tradesmen, and soldiers of various flavors. You supposedly play the role of the Captain of the King's Guard, although you're really more a Prime Minister and lead general whose job is to reclaim your Sovereign's kingdom from his rebellious son.

While the game runs in "real-time," it's not real-time strategy as we've come to know such games, except perhaps when it comes to combat. Other than in the all-combat scenarios, most of gameplay involves building up a village and its complex economy to the point where you can deploy armies and take them on the offensive. If you've ever played *The Settlers* series of games, you'll know exactly what the bulk of the game is like, and that's no surprise—a good chunk of the team responsible for this product came from Blue Byte, developer of *The Settlers*.

Despite the "Merchants" part of the title and the reference to trade on the back of the box, there's little capitalism involved and no trade outside your village. Nevertheless, there is an economy that's *very* extensive for a real-time game. Instead of just one or two resources and single-level production you've got up to five raw resources and multiple levels of production, much of it cross-linked. Resources and items can be kept in a central storehouse or moved right to where they're needed, all without money; it's an economic system Communists would love, but one that seems to work in the context of the game. If you're at all a fan of the building phase of other games (*SimCity* and *Caesar* come to mind), this part of the game is initially quite engaging. For fans of RTS combat there is fighting (the "Knights" part of the title), and it's surprisingly good—individuals form into larger units, complete with facing and formation control, and realistic tactics are required for success.

Problems minor and major, however, really drag the game down. The manual is at best decent, but in some cases doesn't even describe game functions. There are only two good tutorial scenarios and the 18 mission campaign—if you want to play a single mission, especially a combat one, you're out of luck. The graphics are pretty but not top-of-the-line, although the detailed unit animations are quite a lot of fun to watch. The strategic AI is pretty much pre-scripted and trigger-based, and the computer players often far outnumber you (but don't do much in the way of building or repair); the tactical AI, on the other hand, can be competent in battle.

The first major problem is the pacing—it can take hours to build up your village and forces, but much of this time you're left twiddling your thumbs waiting for supplies to move or things to be constructed. You have no direct control over your serfs and workers nor can you issue a proclamation to have your underlings focus on a particular part of the economy. A simple speed control would have done away with this problem, but apparently the Joymania folks are set against it, so be prepared to face the tedium portion of the game.

Even if you endure that, you may begin to encounter the frustration portion of the game, namely where parts of your economy or development stop completely. I-Magic admits that there's a bug, or bugs, somewhere in the code that subtly messes the game up; instead of crashing, the game continues to run, but some change deep in its guts causes things to break down further into a mission. So, you may hit the bug but not know it, then put in an hour or more on a mission before it becomes impossible to advance any further. This won't happen to everybody—indeed, it may be involved in a particular play style, one that I-Magic's testers didn't use—but if it happens to you you'll find the game can become unplayable. Sure, you can use a cheat to get around a tough spot, but what's the fun in that?

If developer Joymania relents and puts in a speed control, and if the economy-killing bugs can be tracked down, gamers could have quite a fun little game on their hands, even with the other flaws. These two elements together, though, are game killers; it looks like tedium and frustration beat out fun and fascination any day. *–Scott Udell*



Ah, formations—ready to march off across land cleared by an earlier assault



A sign of troubles: the quarry (northernmost building) is full of stone, but the watchtowers are almost empty—why is this happening?



A busy village... or, it should be busy—what are all those serfs doing standing around?



Aside from the two tutorial missions and multiplayer maps, the linear campaign is it in terms of gameplay

★★½☆☆

Knights & Merchants

Interactive Magic • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 24 MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-6 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial


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War Along the Mohawk

And now for something completely different

War Along the Mohawk may get honors for being the most unique game of the year. Not unlike *Rage of Mages* [see page 134], it mixes real-time strategy with role-playing, only in this case it also combines the historical and fantastical in a colonial French and Indian War setting. This combination produces one strange animal, and due to this unique nature, or perhaps in spite of it, it may scratch that itch gamers get for "something different."

Players assume the role of a character assisting either the British or French. There are over twenty different personas available to choose from, varying from soldiers and commanders to rangers, Native Americans and European civilians. Each has attributes that include role-playing factors such as intelligence, strength, aim, and speed. The characters have a number of skills, plus the ability to learn certain other ones as they gain experience. The party size for each mission varies and the attending members have well-defined personalities. It was worth a chortle to hear a startled prim British officer yell, "My tunic!" after taking damage.

The majority of game play takes place in a real-time strategy setting that shares much in common with the other games in the genre. Characters can be selected and given a variety of orders via the handy lasso function. The game allows you to set waypoints for movement, and for the most part party members follow along intelligently, though they have a nasty trait of falling into their own pit traps. Rally and Stay with Lead Character commands are also available and greatly ease movement.

After being spoiled by recent fare, you might find *Mohawk*'s graphics a bit dated, colorful but merely adequate. The view is from directly above, but the unit graphics and objects on the map are small and often difficult to make out (is that a rock or a cannon?). There is one degree of zoom-in, but the objects quickly breakdown into messy old-VGA style jaggies. Due to the graphics, combat can be confusing. Health bars on the actual battlefield are difficult to make out, and while there are larger character icons in the party window, it's difficult to determine quickly who's who.

In combat, the game includes a well-rounded assortment of hand-to-hand and ranged weapons, ranging from the wimpy to the extremes of explosives and cannons. The party may be organized into formations, and larger numbers of non-player character solider types are often assigned to the main party. Possessing the higher terrain and having the longer ranged weapons is the best way to win battles. Equipment may be upgraded between missions.

The skills of the characters are the game's most interesting and strongest feature. Like many good role-playing games, these are dependent on the character's starting background. There are mundane and historical skills such as map-reading, medicine (heal), swimming, cannon, trapping, and language. The fantasy aspects come into play with types of exaggerated Native American abilities. These include such skills as Deer Disappear, an advanced camouflage skill; Wolf Control, where you influence nearby wolves to attack enemies; and a personal favorite, raccoon control, which allows you to assume command of a nearby raccoon to sneak into enemy areas and pilfer valuable items.

Due to the linear nature of the game's campaigns and missions, there's little in the way of replay value (a random mission generator would have helped). Internet play is available with up to four players, but is limited only to battle situations.

The French and Indian War is an often-overlooked time of North American history. Though not a strict interpretation of history, *War Along the Mohawk* does an admirable job of blending strategy and role-playing into this colonial time. The result is a unique game that may be one of the sleeper hits of the holiday season.
–Chuck Klimushyn







[clockwise from top] Deer skins are money and come in handy if you have the deer disappear skill; That deer is actually one of your disguised party members; What's a good RPG without skills and attributes

★★★½☆

War Along the Mohawk
Empire Interactive • www.empire-us.com
Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem, direct connect

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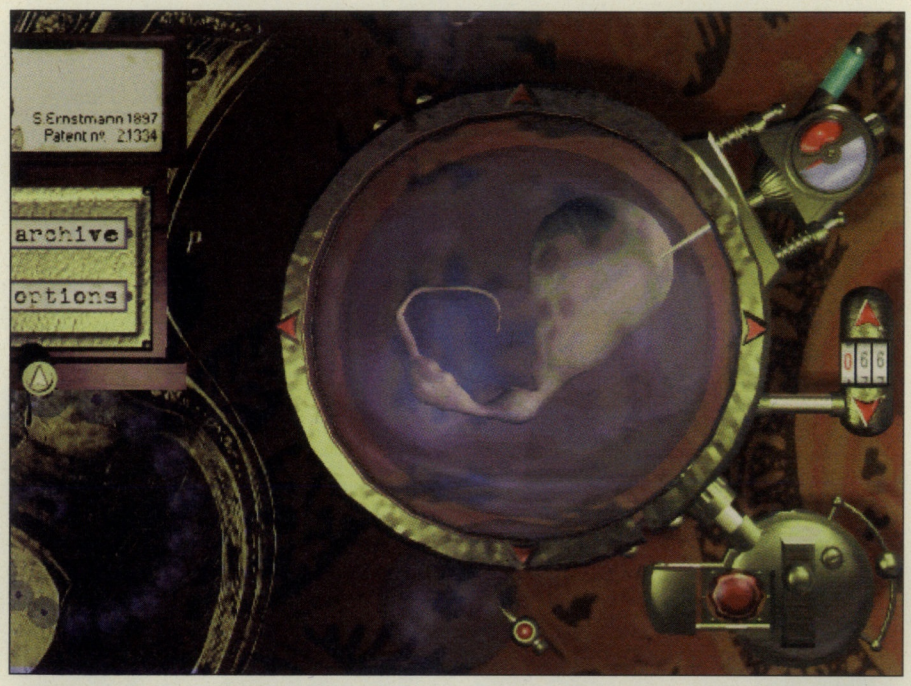
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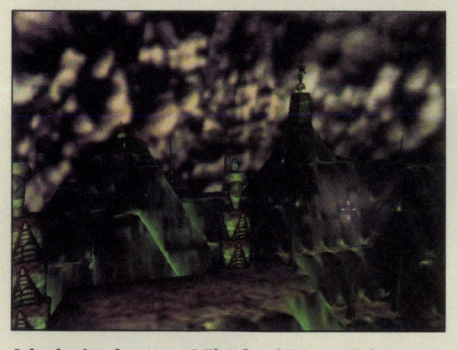
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Sentinel Returns

Nobody does weird better than Psygnosis







[clockwise from top] The fetal "organ" that supposedly holds the next level, or a window into it; The vacant plinth stands ready for you to occupy it and hyper-space to the next Loop; Simple but breathtaking. Those pointy things are Trees in this haunting world

Nobody does weird better than Psygnosis, a company seemingly bent since its inception on hooking us on off-the-wall concepts. Who else in the past could have given us control over a giant-sized mechanical chicken in a deadly gameshow? This same originality serves *Sentinel Returns* well—it is unlike anything on the market. Picture a 3D accelerated, first-person perspective strategy action puzzle game (?) without sidestep controls of any kind and which is not a shooter (gasp!).

From on high, His Weirdness scans the land, searching for energies to absorb. You are an energy being looking to unseat this Sentinel by attaining his height and absorbing him. To do this you too must absorb energy found in the landscape, energy most commonly found in Trees but also found in lesser Sentinels (Sentries) as well as your own creations.

You can "mouselook" about your stationary position and absorb or create things; the you can also transfer your essence to another Robot. These are the essentials of play. To absorb a thing and convert its mass into energy one must have a clear line of sight to it and one must be equal to or higher than it. Thus the Block-building.

The player may create objects with the same limitations as absorption. Trees may be added to the landscape to block the scanning of the Sentinel and its minions. Blocks may be created and stacked one upon the other to gain altitude, and upon these columns Trees or Robots may be placed… the only exception to the altitude limitations. Robots serve as the immobile hosts your energy. It is from the currently inhabited Robot that the player views his or her world. Once created an unoccupied Robot and its supporting Blocks may be re-absorbed by the player, thus regaining the energy involved in their creation.

The Sentinel rotates on his plinth, scanning in an arc for absorbable material. When absorbable material is found the absorption begins, converting the energy of the target back into the primitive Tree forms and dispersing them randomly across the map. If the Sentinal's gaze catches you your energy drains until you are disintegrated and assimilated; your creations may also be absorbed in a similar manner. If you are only half visible, a half-scan takes place where a proximal Tree is turned into a Meany. In short order Meanies will teleport the player's Robot to a random position equal to or below its position, usually a bad thing.

Each map has a constant supply of energy that merely changes form and location. This allows players the opportunity to mix it up (this is a puzzle game?) as they struggle for height and energy. This is the biggest draw of *Sentinel Returns*: the constant energy system allows and encourages pitched play that can survive and prevail over bad luck, and in a myriad of ways rather than in a static "here is the solution" fashion.

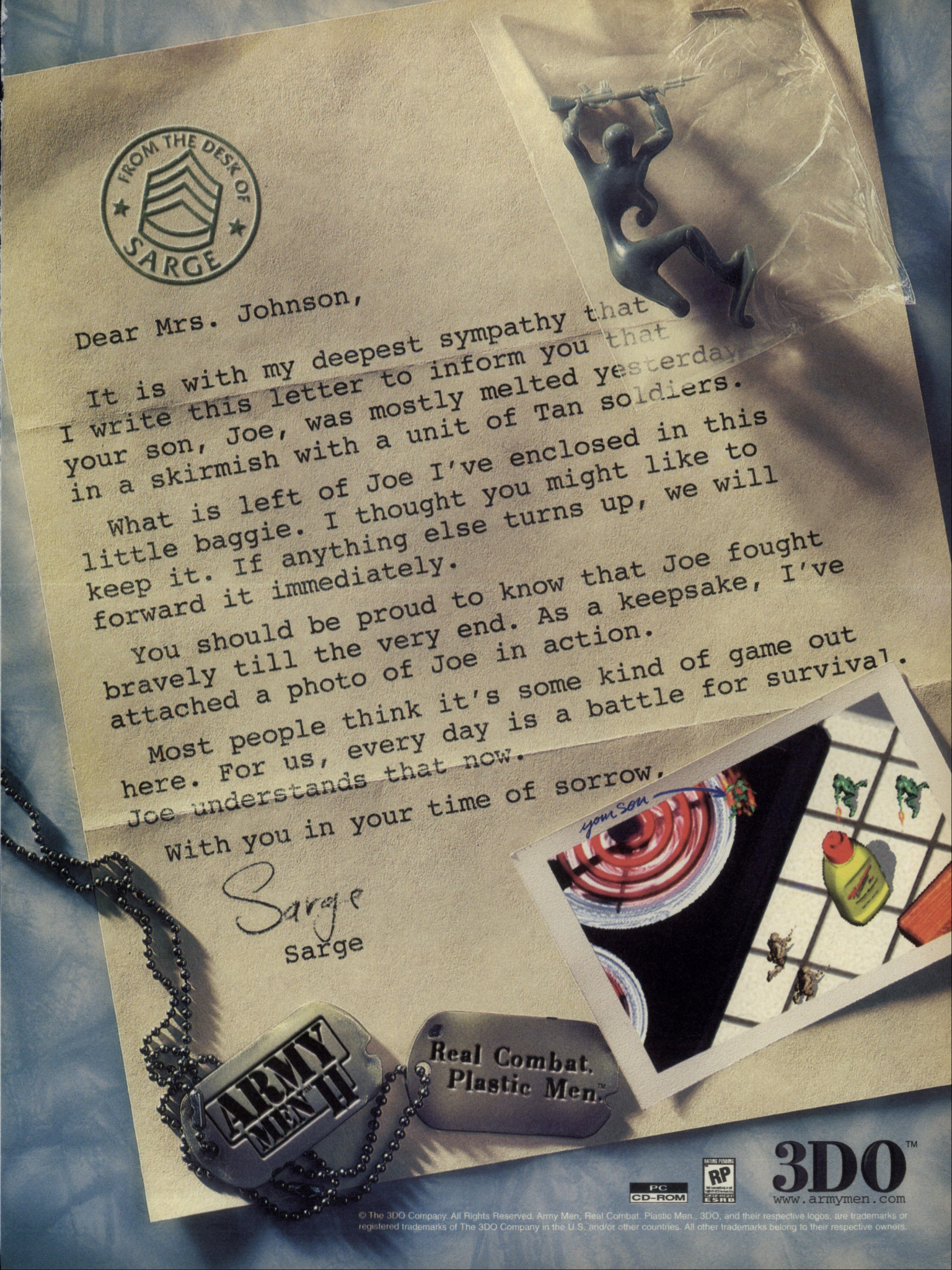
The game has a lot of claustrophobic tension, much of it due to the score, composed and performed by horror movie producer/director John Carpenter (*Halloween*) and Psygnosis' own Gary McKill. As glorious as it is, the music behind the canyon walls and the eerie skies cannot possibly sustain mood over the course of 650 normal levels plus 10,000 randomly generated ones. Sooner or later the emotions noticeably diminish in intensity, leaving only the gazillion levels of more Trees and Sentinels behind. A good thing for longevity purposes, but a few additional elements and themes could have been added later on in the game for variety's sake.

This may all sound like incoherent pointless nonsense when in reality it translates into a pleasant aside from the gaming mainstream. It's so strange that it really has to be tried. Nobody is going to set *Unreal* by the wayside for *Sentinel Returns*, but they might just venture 10 or so levels in-between the nightly gunfights. *–Scott Hunter*

★★★½☆

Sentinel Returns

Psygnosis • www.psygnosis.com
Requirements: Windows 95, 120MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM drive • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial



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Shogo: Mobile Armor Division

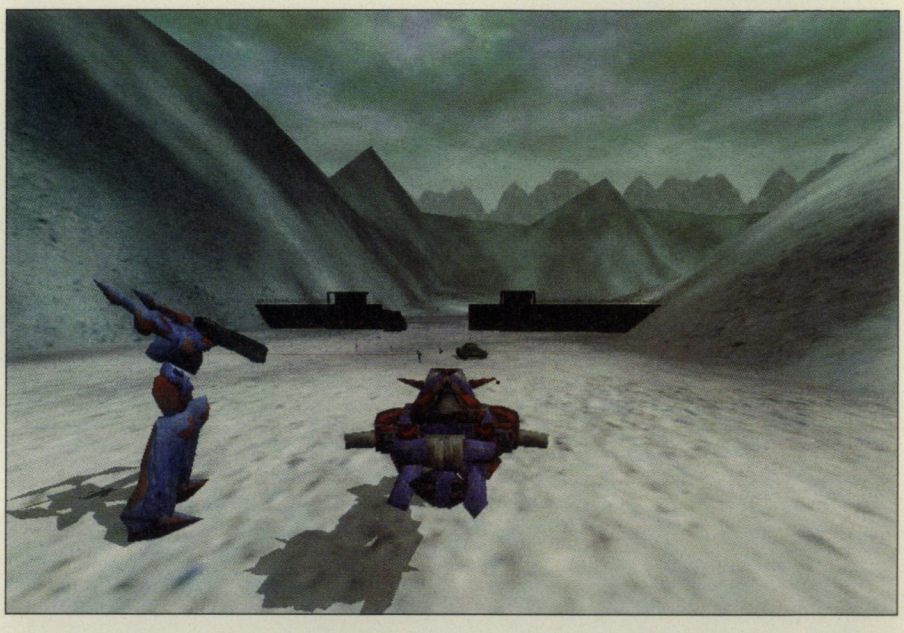
An impressive new entry in the first-person shooter technology wars

Monolith Productions is no stranger to game and technology development. They did *Blood*. They did *Claw*. They did *Get Medieval*. They worked on DirectX. A couple of years ago, they started making an engine for DirectX called DirectEngine and a first-person shooter for it called *Riot* (previewed way back in issue 78). The game languished in obscurity until this spring, when Monolith bought the rights to both the engine and the game back from Microsoft and decided to publish the game themselves. The project has since endured two name changes—the engine becoming the LithTech Engine and the game becoming *Shogo: Mobile Armor Division*.

Shogo is a standard first-person shooter, but there are two very distinct styles of gameplay that help differentiate it from the competition. In some levels you fight in a huge Mobile Combat Armor (MCA), a two-story anime-styled Mecha; however, this is no *MechWarrior*. These robots are as fast and agile as any human (or more so), and have none of the exceedingly complex controls and systems you'd find in a sim. In other missions, you run around in buildings on foot, with a normal assortment of weapons—shotgun, pistols, rocket launcher, etc.

While *Jedi Knight* and *Mysteries of the Sith* had decent stories, they weren't integrated into the levels so much as used as intermissions between them. The levels in *Shogo* are tied together by a story that progresses as you play the game, one that isn't told through the usual logs, terminal communications or scripted event or two that gives an overall "theme" to your running and gunning. There is actual dialogue and characters—several times in each level, control is taken out of your hands and a scripted camera takes over as Sanjuro (you) talks to the other characters in the game. While the actual mission objectives are exactly the same "find disc, push button, find exit" kind of thing we've seen a hundred times now, the cut-scenes that accompany each such event almost make you forget their familiarity. *Shogo* is that rare breed of game: a shooter with a solo game you really want to play through to the end.

After the underpowered pea-shooters in *Unreal*, it's fun to wield the kind of firepower *Shogo* puts in your hands. In the on-foot missions, all weapons kill pretty quickly and have a good "weight" to them. Each one has a meaty sound, and the blood flows freely, albeit a little too much on the bright and "cartoony" side. However, the kills look fantastic, with recognizable body parts flying all over the place. Shoot a guy in the head, and his head snaps back; shoot a guy in the feet, and he bends over. The makes for a fun little dance when you shoot a heavily armored opponent at range with the machine gun. The MCA levels, though, are where the real fun lies. Shoot a truck and it blows up real good, sending debris flying all over and likely starting a ground-shaking chain reaction with other nearby vehicles which will themselves explode, sending chunks of debris and smoke trails all over the place. Some of the MCA weapons are so powerful that they cause explosions and debris just by hitting the ground or buildings.



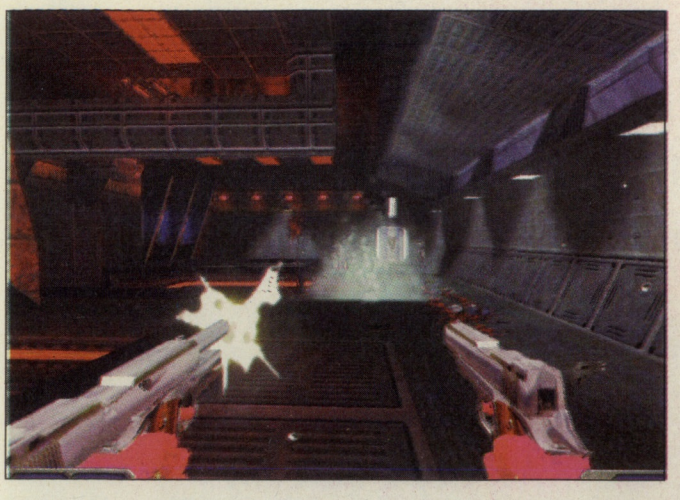
Transformers! MCAs can transform into vehicles that are handy for quick getaways



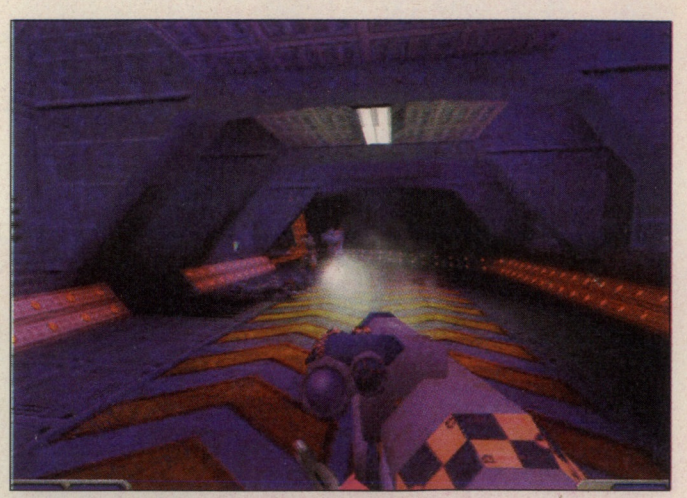
A confrontation moves the plot along

Unfortunately the game features pathetic enemy AI. The enemies don't move much on their own and rarely pursue you through the level. They're all deadly shots, and once they've noticed you they seem to know where you are even when you're out of sight. The game is difficult because most enemies are placed around corners and on the same walls as the door leading into a room, making you blindsided by an enemy that appears to have been waiting for you all along. Cranking up the difficulty level doesn't make the enemies any smarter, it just makes them better and faster shots.

The LithTech engine offers up quite a good load of eye-candy, and gives the modified *Quake II* engines powering *Sin* and *Half-Life* a run for their money. The world is similar in design to *Quake II*, but it supports some of



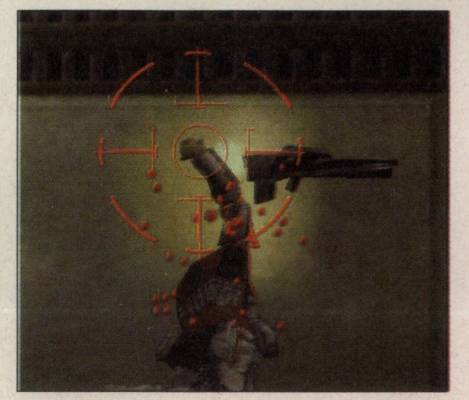
Great guns!



Nice coloring and good lighting make this an attractive game



Not Batman, but some of the in-game atmosphere



Sniping for fun and profit—dig the blood

the more advanced features found in *Unreal*. Unlike *Quake II* in particular, LithTech handles both indoor and outdoor scenes with aplomb. Clouds cast moving shadows across the rolling terrain, and you can see for quite a long distance.

The textures used to paint the environments are detailed and colorful, though often a bit repetitive. The character models vary in quality—many of the human models are a little too tall and skinny and end up looking goofy, while the textures for the ubiquitous body armor don't make them look particularly human. While the animation is motion-captured and fluid, it seems a little bit "off" at times. The Mecha, on the other hand, look absolutely fantastic, with killer models and textures.

On a technical level, the LithTech engine does has a few aces up its sleeve. All models in the game are stored in a format with many levels of detail, so the game can scale smoothly between models with few polygons when they're far away, or many more when they're up close. The maximum detail can be altered, along with many other display settings, to keep the framerate up on a variety of machines. The engine displays shadows as well, though they're slightly fixed versions of the shadows you see in *Quake II* with the console command "gl_shadows 1." That is, they still are only cast in one direction based on a global light source and are always perpendicular to the player, sticking out over ledges and stairs. Still, the game looks better with them than without, and they can easily be turned off.

The game has excellent sound, with effects that are nice and beefy. Explosions are appropriately butt-shaking, and you get high-quality and clear reports from guns like the Assault Rifle. The voice acting is good—despite the anime flavor, it's not over-acted or cheesy. Sanjuro has the sort of sarcastic sense of humor that has him saying what many players are likely thinking. The music is a mixed bag—it's wavetable MIDI-based, with custom instruments. There's simply not enough variety or enough upbeat, fast-paced tunes, however, though what there is isn't bad.

From a graphic standpoint, *Shogo* is able to stand up to the competition, offering high-quality visuals that lie somewhere between *Quake II* and *Unreal*, support for a wider variety of 3D accelerated cards via Direct3D and the advantage of running smoothly on a wider spectrum of machines. Even with a 200MHz Pentium system equipped with an original Voodoo card, users should be able to run at medium detail level and experience a very playable and good-looking game. Jump up to a Pentium II and a Voodoo^2 and you should be able to run at higher-resolutions with full detail at high frame rates.

As far as multiplayer goes, the game features a slick Multiplayer Wizard utility that lets you easily setup a multiplayer game, and it ships with Gamespy 2.03 to help you find Internet games. Multiplayer gameplay turns out to be better than expected, with well-balanced and powerful weapons. The game has a Critical Hit system, where certain shots do more damage than normal while actually restoring your own health, and it adds a new element to play, encouraging players to be on the offensive. Deathmatches in MCA mode are the most entertaining, with all kinds of explosions, debris and smoke all over the place. The MCAs can all transform into vehicles, which are much faster but cannot fire weapons. This adds a new element to the "strategic retreat" and enables newly-spawned players to quickly seek out their favorite weapon. *Shogo* delivers the same kind of fast-paced, fear-for-your-life multiplayer game that the better *Quake II* MODs are able to do.

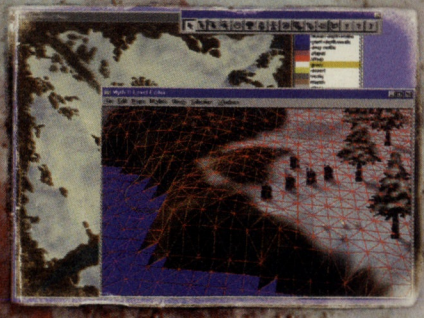
Unfortunately, all the good in *Shogo*'s multiplayer bag of tricks is nearly negated by its poor performance. Over a LAN it works perfectly, but on the Internet it's a different story. It's nearly as unplayable as *Unreal*, requiring all your skill just to navigate the level, much less fire effectively. The game also has difficulty connecting to servers. Monolith plans a patch (of course) to address these issues, which should be available by the time you read this, but keep in mind *Unreal* still doesn't work, and they've been promising their patch for the past six months.

All in all, *Shogo: Mobile Armor Division* is a terrific product. Though it has a flawed multiplayer game, its solo game delivers serious entertainment. Monolith is committed to helping foster the level editing and MOD community, which could add a lot of long-term value. For now, it's enough to be able to commit some serious virtual carnage, and in that regard, *Shogo* delivers in spades. *–Jason Cross*

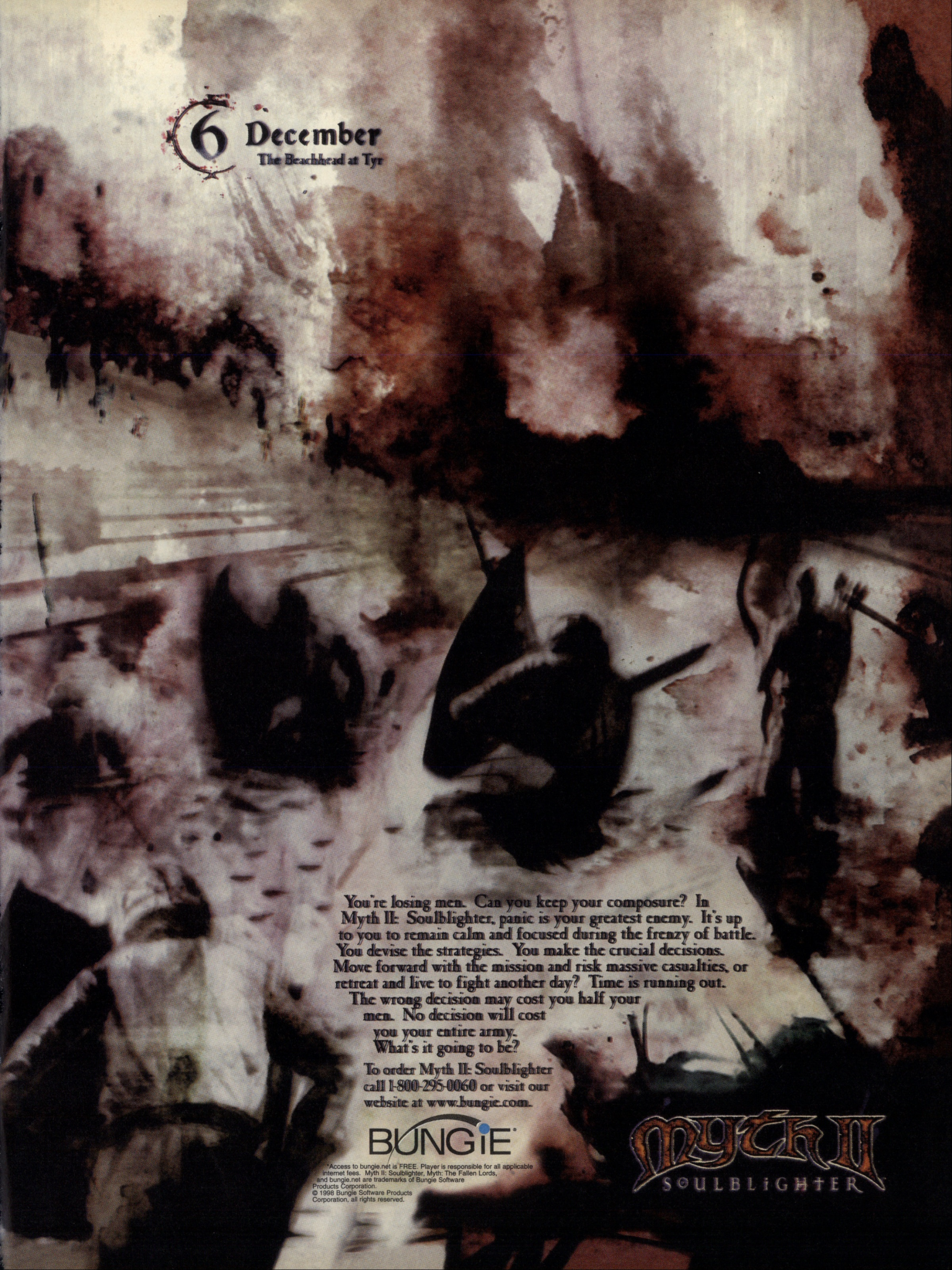
★★★★☆

Shogo: Mobile Armor Division
Monolith Productions • www.lith.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 32 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN

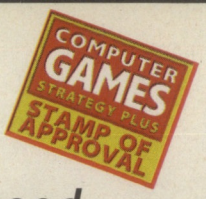
TAKE THE HILL. THE EARTH TREMBLING. BLACK WITH BLOOD. HEAVY FOOTSTEPS DISSOLVE INTO A STEADY RHYTHM OF THUNDEROUS BLASTS. MINDS AND LEGS NUMB. GET TO THE HILL. FIERY ARROWS RAINING FROM ABOVE. BLACK WAKES WEAVING A SUFFOCATING BLANKET OF FEAR. MY MEN CHOKING THEIR FINAL BREATHS. JUST MAKE IT TO THE HILL. SCREAMS FROM BEHIND? ARE WE FLANKED? SHADOWS ADVANCING LIKE A DEATH SHROUD. THE HILL. GET TO THE HILL.






6 December
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MYTH II
SOULBLIGHTER

Delta Force



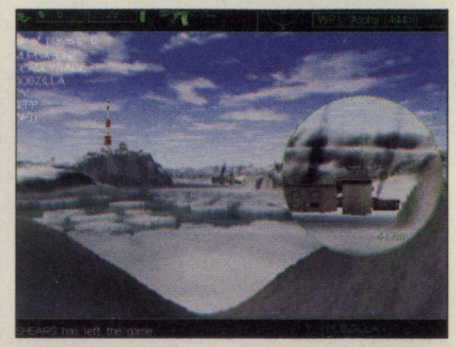
Chuck Norris never had it so good



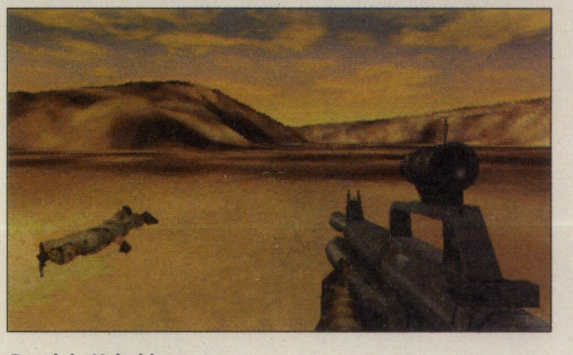
Lining up a shot on a Russian renegade



Your mission briefing. Often, ignoring your orders and picking your own route is best



The 16-bit color mode allows for some spectacular views, especially through the 4X scope on your assault carbine



Death in Uzbekistan

What can you say about a 3D shooter that isn't 3D accelerated, takes place almost entirely outdoors and doesn't offer a single power-up? You can say it's one of the best action games of the year, that's what. NovaLogic's *Delta Force* breaks most of the rules in the 3D shooter canon. It doesn't support any 3D accelerators. It doesn't have any maze-like levels littered with key cards and rocket launchers. What it does have, however, is a huge helping of first-person shooter fun. It's an action title, based loosely on the US Army's elite commando unit, that requires equal measures of tactics and twitch.

In the solo game, *Delta Force* offers five campaigns of various lengths, each with at least six missions. The campaigns are not dynamic, but they aren't completely linear either. You can usually choose between two or more missions at any given point in a campaign. Victory in one mission often opens up one or more new missions, so there is some sense of progression. In the course of the game, you'll have to blow up radars, missiles, power generators, truck convoys, and other facilities, as well as massacre hordes of bad guys.

Your Delta Force detachment is divided into three teams: Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie. You are Bravo, and you always go it alone. Alpha and Charlie may or may not accompany you; these one to two-man teams are beyond your control, though they do usually behave intelligently and do a good job at their missions. This is not a strategy game; there is no *Rainbow Six*-like planning phase. You can, however, examine your mission briefing map before the mission and see what you're up against.

The long-range combat that characterizes *Delta Force* takes some getting used to, especially in multiplayer games. In solo missions, the more expert bad guys are crack shots, but online with real opponents, you'll think you're facing a firing squad. By and large the long ranges and deadly encounters in the game are a Good Thing; you have far more tactical options than in any other shooter, and outflanking and the indirect approach are actually viable tactics. Only sniping is sometimes problematic; it's too often difficult to line up the crosshairs on targets which are just a pixel or too off.

Delta Force uses NovaLogic's favorite software tool, voxels. Voxels (Voxel Space 3, to be precise) allow *Delta Force* to do something no other 3D shooter can do: depict huge, detailed landscapes where players can see and shoot out past a simulated kilometer or more. They also allow NovaLogic to create maps that offer a lone soldier on foot tactically meaningful terrain to exploit. The drawbacks? Voxels can't be accelerated like traditional polygons; you won't get any benefit from your Voodoo card in a voxel game. Also, voxels won't support most lighting effects like light sourcing that gamers have come to take for granted in 3D shooters. With *Delta Force*, NovaLogic has done an excellent job of milking the voxel technology for all of its benefits while minimizing its drawbacks. That doesn't mean it's perfect; you will need a Pentium II with fast video to play this game comfortably at 640x480, much less 800x600.

On the multiplayer front, *Delta Force* doesn't disappoint either. Capture the flag games with sixteen or more players are smooth and utterly amazing. It's disconcerting to die from unseen shooters, but after a while you get used to the requirements of the battlefield. What's more, you can actually use covering fire, to keep the heads of the enemy down and support your team mates. Grenade launchers come into their own in multiplayer, as they make for excellent suppressive fire, but sniper rifles are the true choice of the expert player. A player who can select a covered firing position, and draw an accurate bead on the foe, can expect to become feared and hated in short order.

Delta Force is not a *Quake* clone. It isn't a wargame. It's not a strategy/action title. It's simply a superb first-person shooter with outdoor environments and real-world weapons and themes. This game rocks. *–Robert Mayer*

★★★★½

Delta Force

NovaLogic • www.novalogic.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM Multiplayer: 2-32 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial



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Ares Rising

Waiting for the next Privateer... keep waiting

Ares Rising tries to jostle its way through the crowded space combat genre but unfortunately falls flat. You are John Marlowe, a rebel who plays by his own rules. After an affair gone wrong, you find yourself on the lam with a price on your head. Enter IPEC, a large corporation that decides it can use your skills. You sign on the dotted line and are furnished with a nice base and a ship.

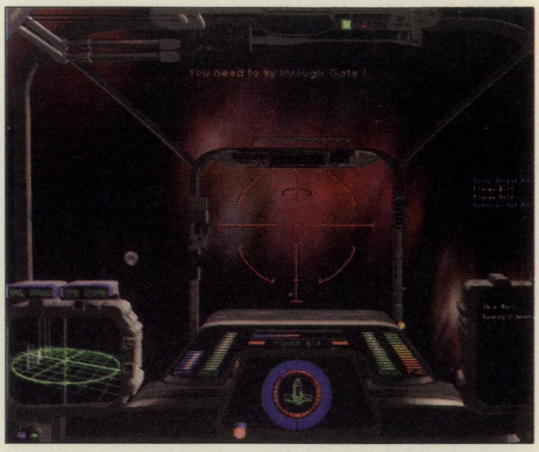
At this point you start to receive missions. Most of your between-mission time will be spent at the computer terminal in your office, where you receive your missions. Once accepted, you're faced with an enormous amount of equipment available for your use. There are the traditional weapons, shields, and radar systems, but a multitude of other more bizarre equipment: you can even choose duct tape as an inexpensive repair option.

Once in space the game really starts to fall apart. *Ares Rising* tries to model inertia, but as implemented it basically forces you to constantly overcompensate for drift while trying in vain to keep the enemy in your sights. There is an alternate arcade control mode that reverts to a more familiar *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter* feel, but the controls are still slippery.

You'll soon wonder what the big deal is anyway. The world is terribly shallow, with no memorable characters. While there is a story, it's a Frankensteinian concoction of sci-fi clichés, giving the game an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. It's been done better many times before. Every quality feature, like the ability to collect salvage at the end of a mission, pales in comparison to the deficiencies of other features, from the flight modeling to the blasé graphics.

Like every second game that has come out this year, the games features support for 3D acceleration, but it seems wasted. The ships are poorly drawn and blocky, with engines that feature squares that "glow" with a texture that looks eerily similar to the chalice at the end of *Adventure* for the Atari 2600. Other graphics in the game, including your base and ship instruments, recall the heyday of EGA.

With its derivative premise, shallow world and poor visuals, *Ares Rising* is extraordinarily mediocre, not a case of the developers aiming too high and missing as much as not aiming high enough in the first place. *–Nathan Smith*



Looking good, but don't believe everything you see

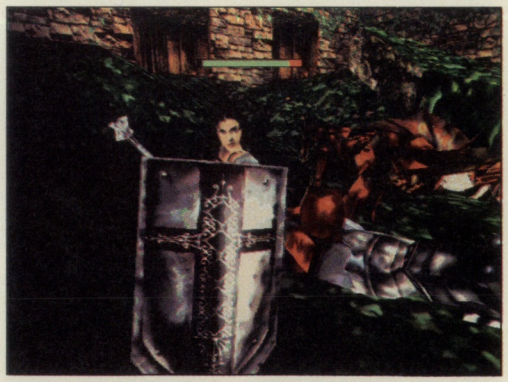
★★½☆☆

Ares Rising

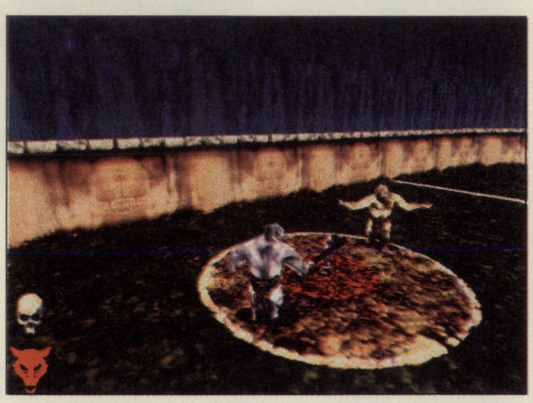
iMagine Studios • www.imaginestudios.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

Limb from Limb

More disemboweling for the whole family



Think she could kick Lara's ass?



Play some Ogre hockey, one of the new Arena games

Die by the Sword may be one of the most underrated action games of the past year. Lacking the Internet play that seems to keep a game in the public's consciousness, its control scheme, dubbed VSIM, remains the most revolutionary interface since Bethesda introduced mouse-look in their *Terminator* series. *Limb from Limb* is an add-on that adds enough new features to make the combo package a must-own for action game fans.

Limb from Limb adds an all-new Quest, which is a collection of levels for you to play through before reaching an end-game boss character. It's on par with the original game's, adding a few more puzzles and turning up the difficulty a few notches. You can now take any character through the quest, and customize the weapon they use.

The game remains a nearly perfect mix of surreal hyper-violent humor and intense action, but its Achilles Heel is still its console-style saved game system. You can't save anywhere, only where the game elects to save for you. While there are more save points in the add-on quest, it still means you'll be forced to re-do things more than you would in, say, a *Quake* or *Tomb Raider*. Due to the level of physics and control the game possesses, it's probably more of a technical issue than a design one, but that doesn't make it any less annoying.

There are a number of new additions in the Arena. A new game, Ogre Hockey, has been added, and it's a minor hoot. Of additional interest is the Encounter, which is a co-op level for fans of that style of play. There are also a few new arenas and some new monsters you can slaughter, or slaughter with.

Playing on the Internet remains an extremely laggy experience, but if you liked the original game, *Limb from Limb* is an incredibly worthy add-on. *–Steve Bauman*

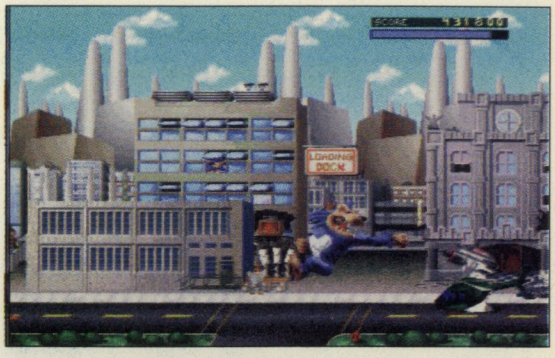
★★½☆☆

Limb from Limb

Tantrum • www.interplay.com Requirements: Die by the Sword • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN

Rampage World Tour

Smells like retro-gaming at its beta-ist



Ah, Detroit. Actually, it looks better this way

Ah, retro gaming, where everything older than 1994 is "classic." Slightly aging arcade hounds will probably remember the original game *Rampage*, which was simple and shallow yet entertaining in small doses. Pick from one of three giant monsters (a big ape, an overstuffed wolfman and a Godzilla-type thing) and knock down buildings and eat people, all the while trying to avoid being shot by tanks, helicopters and local law enforcement. And it was multiplayer—three people could beat the stuffing out of both the buildings and each other.

So, *Rampage* is back. The monsters are 3D-rendered, the buildings multi-faceted, the landscape can scroll, but it's still the same old game you either loved or hated. And for mindless fun, this is perfect fare—it even automatically saves the game at whatever level you stopped at when you get bored playing for the day. It's got the same three-player option as the old coin-op (though you'll need three Sidewinder pads to make use of it), and the controls are the same—as in, not terribly responsive, but enough to do the job without too many complaints.



Take a couple friends out for dinner and a day on the town!

The real problems with *Rampage World Tour* are technical. What exactly do you make of a game where the version number is listed as "beta," and upon calling Midway's tech support, get told they're surprised you could even get the game to run at all? As Midway's first foray into the world of PC games (GT Interactive handled their games prior to this), this is not a good sign for the future.

But the fact remains that even if you do get the game to work properly, it's minor entertainment at best. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but the gameplay gets old pretty fast, and the generally buggy state of the game as it was released makes it, at best, a dubious purchase. *–Jason D'Aprile*

★★½☆☆

Rampage World Tour

Midway • www.midway.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 100MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-3 players, LAN, same machine

Nam

Jungle snipers and ambushes are par for the course here.



Urban renewal? Not likely

With its aged graphic look and DOS interface, *Nam* is a rather surprising release, and at first glance seems pretty laughable . The game uses the Build engine, which was awesome for *Duke Nukem*, but now seems woefully obsolete. Geriatric technology aside, *Nam*'s attempt to create a mix of standard first-person shooting with the gritty feel of war isn't half bad.

The game looks just like *Duke* in the Jungle, but the thick trees, ramshackle war-torn buildings, overhead bombing runs, napalm strikes and atmospheric noises of war help create an interesting environment. *Nam* places you as Sgt. Alan "the Bear" Westmoreland, a CIA guinea pig given a super-serum which has turned him into an effective one-man army with the Vietnam war as his field test.

Aside from the interesting, if pixilated, landscape, the game's use of US personnel throughout the levels is actually fairly innovative. You'll find CO's waiting in barracks to give you in-game briefings, and medics, grunts, demolition guys and radiomen that will actually follow you around if commanded to do so. These non-player characters supply you with different forms of assistance depending on their orders, and add a distinctive layer of interactivity to the game.

There are two single-player "tour of duties," the first with six levels, the second with eight, and there are ten main weapons, including the old favorites: the shotgun, machine gun, the rocket launcher and grenades. *Nam*'s multiplayer modes are also impressive because of its co-operative gameplay. The game has a "Fireteam" mode, where each player can pick a different type of soldier, each with different weapons and abilities, then play the single-player levels as a team. There're also "Capture the Flag" and standard deathmatch options.

While it's easy to simply disregard the game in the face of high tech shooters like *Unreal*, *Nam* has a few interesting features that let it rise at least partially above its technically obsolete roots. *–Jason D'Aprile*



Hmm, smells like a trap

★★½☆☆

Nam

GT Interactive • www.gtgames.com Requirements: DOS, 486DX4/100 or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, LAN, modem, serial

Trespasser

The finest box stacking simulator ever created

When crafting a flight or driving simulation, designers often have to make tradeoffs between their quest for absolute realism and the realities of developing a superior gameplay experience. Realism for realism's sake is a good idea in theory, but it's fallacious to assume that something "real" is inherently better than something "fake."

Trespasser is one of the best litmus tests of that particular theory. One of the year's most intriguing releases, this first-person 3D action/adventure is equal parts revolutionary concept and naïve and inept execution. As a game that tries function by the same real-world physics as our own world, it manages to challenge every notion of what constitutes a "fun" computer game.

"Fun" as applied to computer gaming is as abstract as it is with any other activity. For some, the pleasures of *Trespasser* may be sublime. They may find the experience of picking up objects and watching them interact with the environment in a realistic manner thoroughly engaging, the ultimate expression of programming skill. (This assumes they know how difficult it is to craft the realistic physics engine that powers the game.) For others *Trespasser* may be one of the most boring gaming experiences they'll ever encounter, an exacting hiking simulation through completely linear environments populated with tons of boxes and a few dinosaurs.

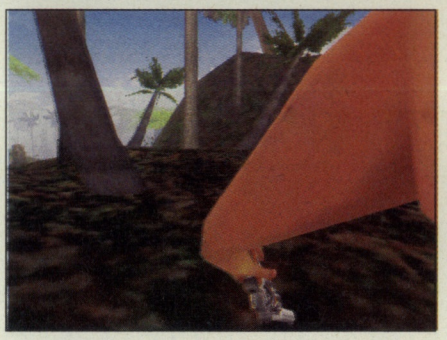
The truth lies somewhere in between. While it offers the same clichéd "find the keycard" puzzles of other games, it does offer multiple physics-based real-world solutions to some of those problems. However, whatever benefits are gained from this open-ended approach are quickly diminished by the game's bizarre interface and staggering technical requirements.

Yet there are times when the entire game springs to life, when suddenly you have raptors nipping at your tail and you're trying to make that leap across the monorail, or when you're out of ammo and you manage to drop a box on a dino, killing it instantly. At these points, which are too few and too far between, you begin to see what the game could have been, a true action/adventure set in a realistic and believable world. As it stands, it's a fairly impressive technology demo masquerading as a game.

Watching the *Jurassic Park* movies, you can't help but be impressed with how they manipulate the viewer. *Trespasser* could have used more of these types of contrivances as it lacks any narrative thrust to propel the player through the game. You play Anne, voiced by Minnie Driver, a woman leaving for a vacation in Costa Rica whose plane crashes on Site B, the island where the events in the movie *The Lost World* take place. The game's goal is simple—find a radio or phone and call for help—but you're (of course) forced to span the entire island while learning its history (supplied by the disembodied voice-over of John Hammond, played by Lord Richard Attenborough). Through your travels, you have two basic tasks—kill or avoid dinosaurs.



You're not invited to this party



Ouch, that can't be comfortable



There are a few stationary guns to find

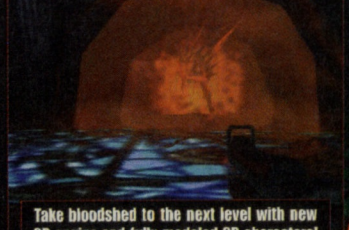
You travel through the seemingly eternal jungles and compounds of Site B in a first-person perspective. Your interface with the world is the "robo-arm with the kung-fu grip," probably the game industry's first attempt to model a virtual-reality arm. (Only one arm, mind you. Her left arm is mysteriously missing, or otherwise engaged.) This hideously ugly appendage is controlled by holding down the mouse button to extend the arm. At this point you can pick up objects, and holding down various keys allows you to orient the object in three-dimensional space. While innovative, the control scheme's execution is incredibly frustrating. You spend as much time orienting objects and trying to place them with precision as you do "adventuring." Stacking crates just because the game allows you to do so in a realistic manner isn't inherently interesting, it's one of those boring and mundane tasks we do in the real world. You grab the box, fight with the interface in order to orient it perfectly, place it on top of the other crate, and hope the flaws in the physics engine don't cause it to slide off the box, at which point you get to repeat the endeavor *ad nauseum*.

The interface also presents some serious gameplay problems. Much to the game's detriment, you can only carry two inventory objects, one of which always has to be in your hand. Unfortunately, running robo-arm into a wall or object usually jars it from your hand, forcing you to stop and pick it up over and over again (occasionally objects will disappear into the wall you've run into). While realistic (to an extent), picking up the same stick for the

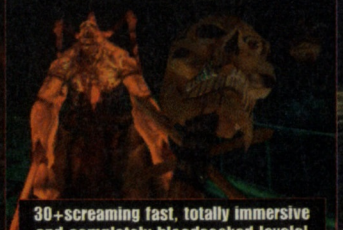


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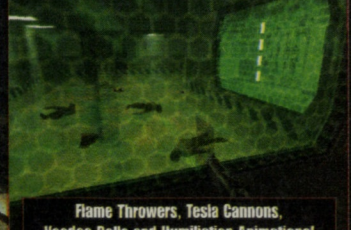
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Bad breath attack! Bad breath attack!



Da plane, da plane



These two raptors are ready for the NBA Raptors



Mr. Raptor takes a hit

eighth time isn't fun—doing something interesting with it is what's fun.

The frustration you feel transports long-time gamers back to the days of text adventures. Those games featured a parser that understood simple English commands—the challenge was to figure out which words it could understand. *Trespasser* utilizes the language of physics, which proves just as frustrating. The vaunted physics engine, which in many ways lives up to the claims on the box, seemingly lacks one vital component, friction. *You* may know that two objects placed on top of one another will form a makeshift staircase so you can scale a wall, but the engine doesn't; instead, everything feels greased, so objects tend to slide apart whenever combined, regardless of their weight, texture, or the incline. A lesser problem is that the effect of gravity seems reduced—maybe it's the heavy and humid jungle air.

A bigger issue for most players is the game's exorbitant system requirements. On the plus side, *Trespasser*'s physics processing represents one of the first attempts in 3D gaming to use processor power to do something beyond polygon pushing for greater visual fidelity. But at what cost? The game is an absolute pig, wanting a lot of processor (don't bother if you don't have a Pentium II) and even more memory (128MB of RAM beats 64MB). Even with a god-like machine the visual payoff isn't particularly satisfying. The game uses a lot of repeating textures done at different resolutions depending on their distance from you. The game constantly swaps the textures back and forth, giving the game an incredibly weird look as you move across a constantly undulating landscape. There are plenty of small graphical glitches that appear from time to time, including clipping problems, textures missing or appearing strangely, and floating tress and buildings.

The environments, which feature magical barriers that keep you on a straight and linear path (also known as "a steep incline that you can't seem to climb") are among the most believable presented in a game. The jungle is lush and populated with all sorts of well-animated dinosaurs for you to kill or avoid. Apparently every employee of Site B was a proud member of the NRA; rare indeed is the location without lots of guns lying around. Surprisingly, all are completely functional, and most are loaded.

As with most 3D games, careful examination shows that parts of the environments were created solely to show off the game's formidable technology. Where *Unreal* uses colored lighting for no apparent reason other than it can, the level designers in *Trespasser* tend to place objects everywhere so we can marvel at their accurate physics. A box sits at the top of the stairs so you can watch in awe as bumping it causes it to do its magic tumble. Never before have you seen a world with so many stacked boxes and cans ready for your toppling pleasure.

Despite all of these flaws, *Trespasser* can be oddly compelling. Chalk that up to a feeling that you *can* do anything to solve any of the game's problems. Having multiple solutions to problems is the holy grail for developers, but it's useless if you need an advanced degree in interface manipulation in order to operate anything. *Trespasser* seems preoccupied with forcing the player into doing the boring and mundane—just like real life. Box stacking or dino hunting: which do *you* think is more interesting?

The team creating the game obviously is talented, but their talent has been misdirected. Real-world physics enhance any game, but they're aren't by themselves a game. This fallacy permeates every line of code that went into the crafting *Trespasser*, that somehow a more realistic world makes for a better one. The game ends up falling somewhere between being one of the most innovative and unique game experiences realized on a PC and the most gratuitous example of technological masturbation ever fostered upon the gaming community. Ultimately, it's merely the finest box stacking simulation ever created, but not much of a game. *–Steve Bauman*

★★☆☆☆

Trespasser

DreamWorks Interactive • www.dreamworksgames.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 166 MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None



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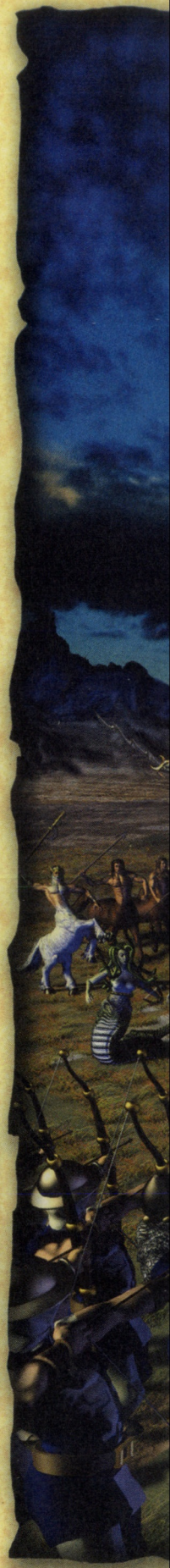
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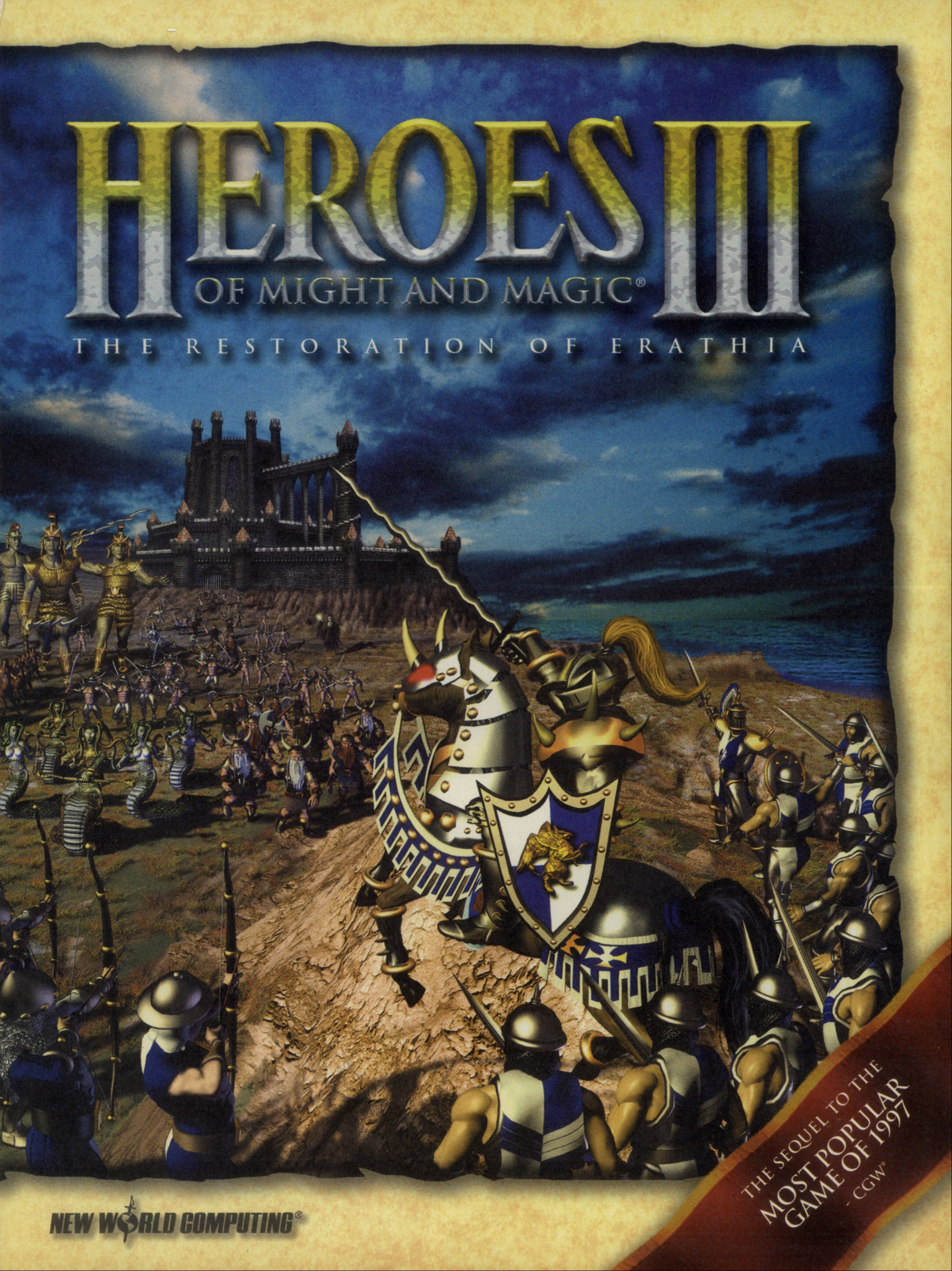
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Rage of Mages

A fairly high-quality role-playing/strategy hybrid

Many games have straddled the line between role-playing and strategy: more recent games like *X-COM* and *Heroes of Might and Magic* were true hybrids, and going back further, some of those old SSI "Gold Box" games felt as much like tactical strategy games as they did a story-based role-playing adventure. With the reemergence of the role-playing game (RPG) and the continued popularity of real-time strategy (RTS), it's not surprising that a game has merged those two gameplay elements. However, unlike the recent strategy and 3D action hybrids, games blending RPG and RTS feel integrated and whole, as both game types lend themselves to thoughtful play.

While unlikely to satisfy hardcore fans of either genre, *Rage of Mages* is a fairly high-quality synergy of the two genres; in fact, it's an almost perfect split down the middle. Take the stats, character building, treasure hoarding, and fantasy setting most RPGs and combine it with the style of combat and interface of most RTS games, and you'll know what you're in for.

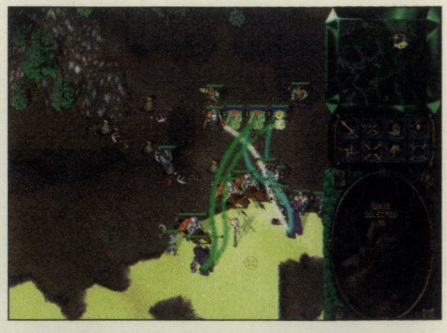
The game originated in Russia, which explains the flat dialog and bad voice-acting (you can tell they're rushing to keep up with the animation). The storyline is some derivative nonsense about retrieving a magical weapon in order to end the wars that have enveloped the land.



You get lots of cool looking armor and weapons later in the game



This is not a good battle



These trolls don't stand a chance against these ragin' mages





The cutscenes are of unusually high quality

The single-player game features a story-based campaign of 25-ish branching missions (multiplayer features *Warcraft*-like battles). You start the game with a couple of heroes; based on your actions they evolve from wimps to powerful fighters or mages. From a central town, you're able to equip your heroes and increase their blade or magic skills. You also talk to various denizens of the game world and receive "quests" you need to complete in order to purge the land of evil (or at least do some typical RPG Boy Scout work).

Once you've selected your "quest," the game switches to a more traditional RTS mode of play. The gameplay feels like the missions in *Warcraft II* where you had a fixed number of units and no resource management to contend with. Unlike that game, how you equip your heroes, and which mercenaries you choose to join you, has an enormous effect on whether or not you can successfully complete the quest.

In a game like *Command & Conquer*, your drive to complete the mission was partially fed by a desire to see the next "cool" animated cutscene. In *Rage of Mages*, you get that true RPG sense of accomplishment, a feeling that your characters are evolving and get to play with some nifty new weapons and armor. However flimsy the story may be, you get that sense of plot advancement that opens up new quest opportunities. The quests are somewhat varied, and a few are puzzle-like. None are particularly taxing on the brain, though the last few will test your mousing abilities to their fullest extent.

As an RTS game, *Rage of Mages* surprisingly holds its own. After selecting your party of units (you can have upwards of 20 units per quest), you can use a "Swarm" command to have them fight large battles against many foes without the need to micromanage the attacks. You can cast spells in battle, and they do area-wide effects that can harm your own troops. Though the view of the action is fixed, the terrain is true-3D, and line of sight and the speed of your characters is affected by elevation. The enemy AI, though, is basically nonexistent. If you're outside the range of a bad guy, you can attack them with impunity and they will not fight back or flee. ("Oh dear, I'm being attacked by fireball spells. I think I'll rotate in place and die.")

The game features an excellent self-balancing mechanism. As you progress through the game, you start to pick up more valuable loot, expensive weapons and armor become available for purchase, and mercenaries cost more gold. However, the mercenaries upgrade their own armor and weapons, making them more powerful.

Rage of Mages is one of those games that's easy to find fault with but difficult to dislike. By no stretch of the imagination is it a great game. However, it's oddly compelling, one of those games that you feel you shouldn't like because of its flaws yet end up playing to completion because it has that something, whatever it may be, that drives you along. *–Steve Bauman*

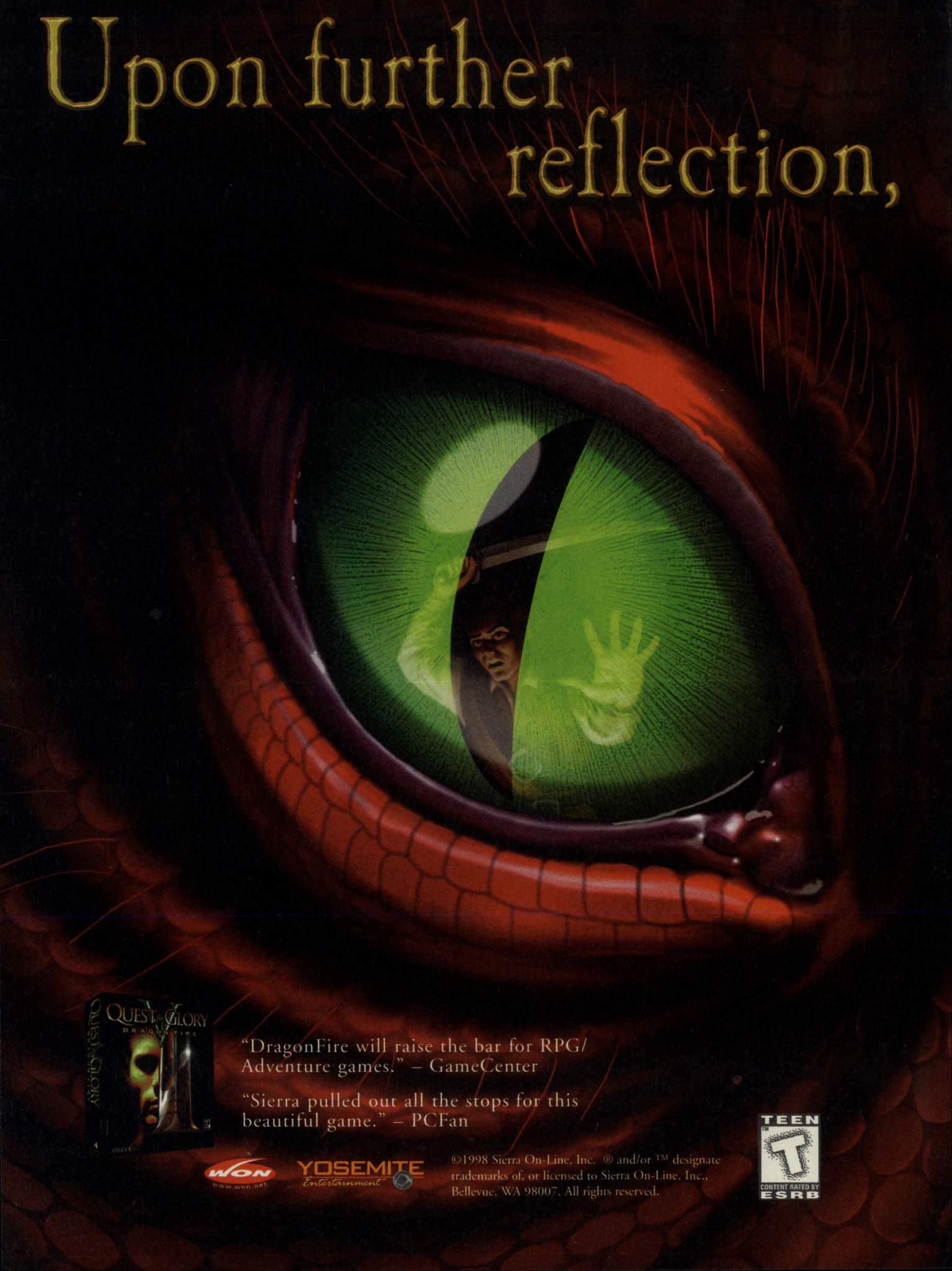
★★★½☆

Rage of Mages

Monolith Productions • www.rageofmages.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-16 players, Internet, LAN


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Upon further reflection,



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MiG-29 Fulcrum
F-16 Multirole Fighter

Going doowwntown!!—downtown Kilrah, that is

One can only wonder why they went to all the fuss. In the not-so-distant past, NovaLogic went to some trouble to forge an alliance with aerospace giant Lockheed-Martin and their fighter division. In theory, one would expect that such an alliance would allow them an edge at trying to capture the feel and behavior of a real jet fighter in their following sims—or at least capture the feel of one of Lockheed's own fighters. Not stopping there, NovaLogic even brought on a couple of the original test pilots as consultants and dropped coy hints about the new levels of authenticity their games were going to achieve. Unfortunately, all this expert help only manifests itself in a limited part of *F-16 Multirole Fighter* and *MiG-29 Fulcrum*.

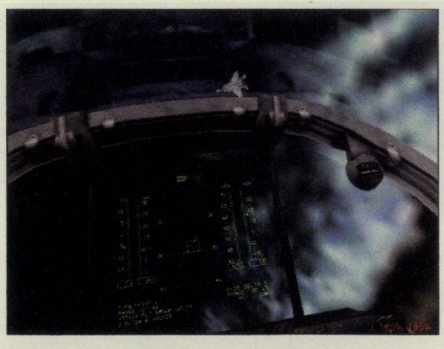
Before continuing, NovaLogic deserves considerable commendation for creating one of the best values in Internet multiplayer gaming today. With either of these games and an Internet connection, you can jump right in to their free "Integrated BattleSpace" and fly against other pilots fighting in either a pure free-for-all or a "Blue vs. Red" battle to neutralize enemy airfields. In fact, it's not unlike a scaled-down contemporary version of *Warbirds*. Internet play is surprisingly smooth even on a humble 28.8 modem, despite the large number of players in the area. However, while the box clearly advertises that the missions can be played cooperatively, no such options are given for IBS players.

NovaLogic has a long tradition hitting the high-end of the scale in the graphics department, and these games are no exception. Players are treated to a very nice looking terrain engine that—amazingly enough—is readable enough to fly at nearly treetop level by eyeball alone. The cockpits of the planes in each game are done in nicely detailed 3D with many working instruments; it's just a shame that, the F-16's MFDs excepted, the buttons and switches aren't clickable at all. The canopy also provides effective reference cues to help players orient themselves during padlock dogfighting. Outside of the cockpit, the jets are very nicely detailed, from the gold-tinted canopy and wing root contrails of the Falcon to the "drag chute" and afterburner effects on the Fulcrum. Both also feature very detailed textures and attractive specular highlights on their airframe skins.

The one area that clearly benefits from expert input is the remarkable avionics suite for both aircraft. This is really quite impressive for an entry-level sim. *F-16* has a surprisingly sophisticated LANTIRN and MFD menu system. *F-16* players actually learn a streamlined interpretation of operating the LANTIRN pod, designating and lasing targets for smart munitions. In *MiG-29*, they can set the "Bitching Betty" and radio to operate in authentic Russian dialogue or heavily accented English—a nice option that hopefully will start a trend for "foreign" craft sims. Both feature authentic "heads-up" displays and cockpits with many functional instruments. Overall, the cockpit environment as a whole is done much better than players would normally have a right to expect out of a "lite" sim.



F-16: Hard to believe it's a 3d cockpit and not a bitmap



MiG-29: Time for a little payback on this F-15



F-16: Almost all the instruments work, even the HSI

On the other hand, the flight modeling is pure fantasy. While the games do model angle-of-attack, control authority, and balance, that's about where the authenticity ends. For example, the speedbrake is nearly useless, although a tight turn can shed 600kph in a split-second flying the in-game MiG-29. While real pilots suffer redout at -3 Gs, the simulated pilots in these games can push –6 Gs continuously and peak at –8 Gs (the G-meter appears quite conservative, to boot). Now if being able to do a break turn by pulling or pushing on the stick isn't quite crazy enough, you can turn on a dime just by stomping on either rudder and yawing the jet around in a heartbeat. "Overpowered" would be one heck of an understatement as well. You can point a fully loaded Falcon straight up, drop your joystick, and just fly up and down like an elevator on throttle settings alone. The only real-world place you'll see either fighter doing stunts like these is in a special-effects studio.

When it comes to weapons, things are a real-

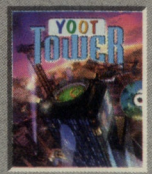
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Kegon Falls

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MiG-29: The wingman takes the shot, you've got his six



F-16: The LANTIRN is probably the most realistic part of the game



F-16: The dark paint brings out the texture and highlighting details

ly mixed bag. On one hand, there is a respectable attempt to represent air-to-ground guided weapons, particularly on *F-16*'s good LANTIRN implementation. However, the missiles and guns are pretty laughable. For example, *F-16*'s passive AGM-88 anti-radiation missiles absolutely require turning your radar on to get a lock on anything other than a pre-programmed target, while radar-guided mid-range missiles work just fine even when the radar is shut down. Air-to-air or SAM missiles are virtually unspoofable, fly rather slowly, and can nearly pull U-turns chasing after their targets. Despite these challenges, players will usually have to deal with threats blindly as neither game provides even a rudimentary "threat view" to give them a sporting chance to spot and dodge incoming missiles. What purpose could have been served by keeping the player guessing and in the dark is totally unclear.

The gun itself fires at a ridiculously slow rate, is incorrectly angled far above the centerline in the Falcon, and the bullets appear to be only affected by gravity when flying right-side up and diving at ground targets. In fact, not only does the ammo practically last forever, it's unfathomably powerful, too. Players may find that all those fancy bombs are simply redundant. Just switch to guns and blaze away as vehicles, water towers, office buildings, and yes, even those annoying hardened targets all crumble under the Death-Star-like might of your internal gun!

A few other amazing flubs made it into the game as well. The damage modeling is purely rule-based. Each player-controlled jet takes precisely two missile hits to shoot down—there appear to be no exceptions. The cannon's firepower is completely inconsistent between aircraft and structures. Even the most rudimentary sound effects must be ponderously spun up and loaded from the CD despite the 100MB minimum install size. Sometimes your weapons will cease to launch altogether, requiring exiting and restarting the game. The FAB series general purpose bombs are incorrectly described as exotic fuel-air bombs in the *MiG-29* manual. Even John Fergione's quote on the *F-16* box appears to have been misappropriated from prior sources.

Your campaign moves along at frantic pace. The missions and the interface are engineered in such a way that players are rarely ever likely to spend more than a minute without shooting at something or being shot at. Once the mission ends, players can restart the mission or go on to the next in as little as one or two keystrokes. Where conventional sims may have long transit times and deep strikes, these games put you so close to the action that you may find yourself launching a missile at a target before your landing gear is up. The downside of this is that players are likely to blow through the scripted campaigns pretty quickly, then finding themselves wishing for more replayability.

The final result is gameplay surprisingly similar to a whole campaign's worth of the planetside missions from Origin's *Wing Commander* series, albeit with more missiles. A real irony is that despite this arcade-like nature, players will not get into white-knuckle twisting dogfights very often. The missiles on both sides are so incredibly potent that combat is usually over on the first pass, usually before even getting into visual range. Just turn on any axis to face your enemies, target them, launch missiles, and dodge their missiles—pretty sterile for an action-oriented sim.

With so many sacrifices to the altar of "gameplay," the sad irony is that NovaLogic has lost sight of the fact that "realistic" is not the opposite of "fun," nor is it the opposite of "simple". The real F-16 Falcon is so forgiving and simple to fly that using a realistic flight model wouldn't have made the game significantly harder. As far as the MiG-29 is concerned, they could have still used an authentic flight model and merely prevented the player from taking actions that would normally have caused serious problems. Even depicting weapons that behave right and do realistic damage would have actually been easier—not harder—for players to deal with and would have improved the dogfighting situation as well.

The fact is simply that these games are not "simulations for the masses," but arcade shooters with a jetfighter wrapping. For action junkies looking for a large quantity of missions and a massively multiplayer arena to fight in, the *F-16/MiG-29* "combination pack" makes a good value.

Had the games been developed and marketed as science-fiction shooters in the vein of games like *G-Police* and *Incoming*, this extreme arcade slant would not be a concern. However, NovaLogic heavily advertises the games' authenticity through the blessings of Lockheed Martin and their consultants. *F-16 Multirole Fighter* and *MiG-29 Fulcrum* are simply unworthy of such lofty endorsements. They have the action and pizzazz to be worthy of the *Wing Commander* crowd, but are also performing a terrible disservice to both rookie and veteran sim pilots—regardless of whether they're looking for an entry-level sim or just something a little less cerebral for a change. *–Neil Mouneimne*

★★☆☆☆

F-16 Multirole Fighter/MiG-29 Fulcrum

NovaLogic • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, NT, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-128 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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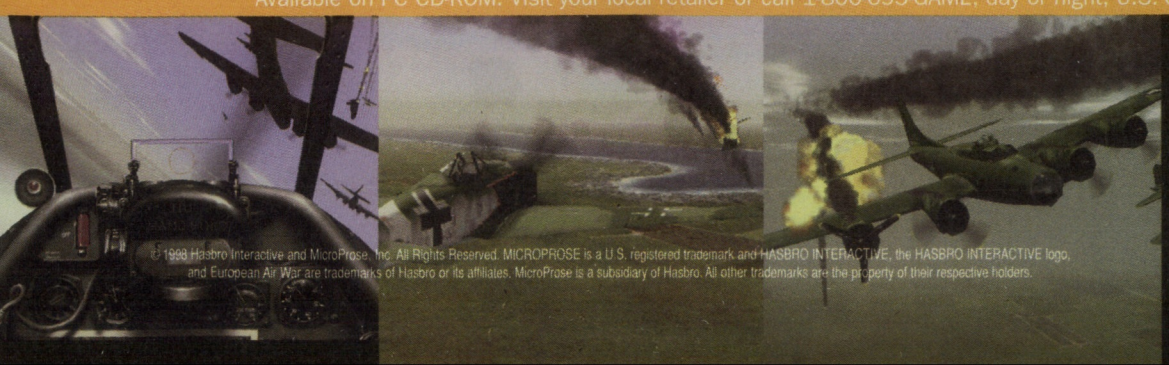
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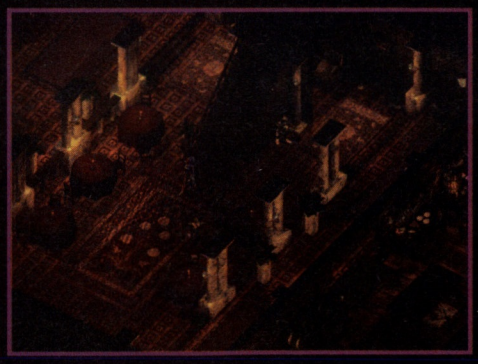


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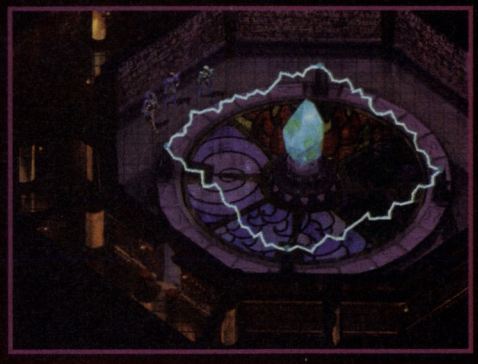
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Combat Flight Simulator

"Final Countdown" finally gets its own sim

Men scramble to their planes in a frenzy. Pounding horns and a percussion section play an homage to Holst's *Mars* as fighters take off to do battle. A rendered montage skillfully blends real-life footage into gameplay video. Just watching the intro sequence gets you excited. Surely the game will be this good, won't it?

Die-hard flight sim veterans may remember that once upon a time *Flight Simulator* had a WWI combat mode. It was perhaps the most rudimentary 3D combat simulation ever. You fought over a roughly 10x10 grid divided by a painted streak down the middle that was supposed to be a river. Just so you could enjoy the scenery and keep a semblance of orientation, it was bordered on two sides by paper-thin "mountains" that were more like a child's scribblings. Even your foes were unimaginably crude—little "I" shaped symbols painted on your screen that symbolically represented enemy biplanes. Well, guns and *Flight Simulator* are back again in a whole new way, and this time not only does it look much better, it looks like it may be more than just a passing relationship.

Microsoft has taken a rather curious tack with *Combat Flight Simulator*. *Flight Simulator*'s game engine isn't exactly suited for a combat sim, and in taking on (nay, shoehorning in) battle fatigues, it finds itself in an awkward fit. Perhaps Microsoft is not after the conventional combat simulation crowd, instead trying to make converts of the large fan base of *Flight Simulator* players and other "non-gamers." Players accustomed to combat sims will immediately feel out of their element, a disorientation underscored by what happens the moment they hit the "F1" key: of hopping into the default "forward cockpit" view, players will find themselves unceremoniously kicked out to the desktop and the game's help system.

The key advantage of this game is its flexibility and expandability. There are a great number of new planes, objects, and scenery packs available from fans or commercial third-party products for *Flight Simulator 98*, and many of these can be converted over. The game simply sticks some guns and a damage model (apparently from the BF109E) onto the plane, whether it's a Cessna 172 or a Gates Learjet, and then you're off to battle the Hun. Then again, during multiplayer games, players have the option to battle other *Flight Simulator* aircraft. Now you can finally settle that old dispute about whether the McDonnell-Douglas MD11 or the Boeing 777 is a better fighter. If the European theater gets dull, just import your favorite scenery pack and off you go. Even the mission files are modification-friendly. Expect third party expansions to sprout up in short order.

Unfortunately, the provided conversion program is not very reliable, nor does there seem to be any way to alter the damage modeling or the type and placement of guns. The result is that imported aircraft have a very crudely "hacked" feeling in the game and offer little more than new graphics and a flight model.



FW190 scores first blood on a USAAF B-17.



Very nice ground textures. Not so nice cloud textures.

Graphics are indeed one area where the strengths and weaknesses of this refurbished general-aviation sim become apparent. The ground textures are superbly photo-realistic, and in fact look appropriate for the geography and time period. You can't help but look and marvel at the scenery below. Ground objects are very nicely done, cast a realistic shadow, and seem to take on a hue appropriate for the time of day. These are the kind of things that tend to be high-priority for general aviation sims.

The problem is that the aircraft and polygon renderings themselves are not nearly as good. For example, while the P-51 and BF109 are reasonably attractive, the P-47 and the olive drab B-17 have unusually crude textures. All the aircraft are rendered much larger on the screen than they ever would be in real life (and no provision is given to normalize this). Debris from gun hits is copious, but is really just a confetti cluster of squares. The padlock has the ugliest example of a virtual cockpit to grace a computer screen in quite some time. The ground textures are spectacular, but the actual terrain shape that they are painted on is rather primitive. Bombs and rockets are merely rendered "symbolically"—you only see two rockets on your wings or one bomb on your fuselage, regardless of how many you are actually carrying. Some things don't make sense at all: shadows are sometimes inexplicably rendered in mid-air, terrain textures have many annoying seams to them, clouds are grossly pixilated, and tracers are extremely small and difficult to see. Even the windowed mode works rather awkwardly—all the more disturbing considering who the developer is.

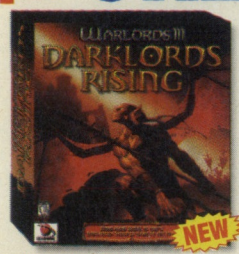
Other areas of the game are pretty good, but simply fall short of where they should be; this is especially true of the flight model. On the surface, *Combat Flight Simulator* has a good flight model. Takeoffs and landings have the right kind of "bobbly" feel to them, as do simple maneuvers. The behavior of the various aircraft feels



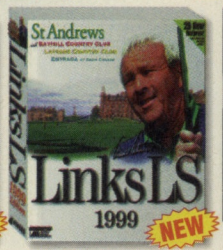
"Fight's on!" between a "Screaming Eagles" F-4B and a Luftwaffe Bf110 (F-4B by Michael Gurezka, http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/michaelgurezka/homepage.htm)

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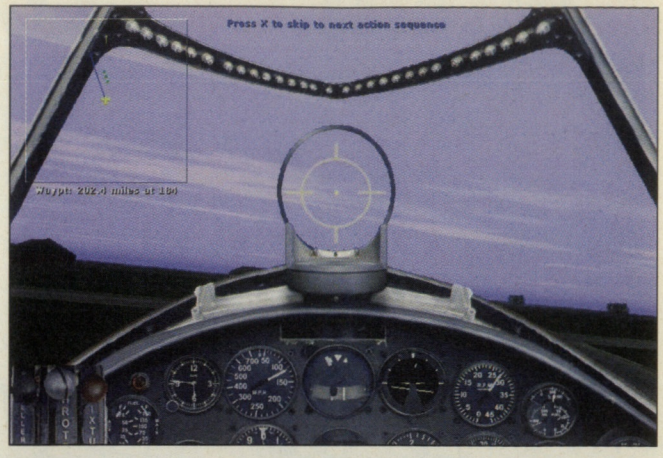
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The dawn lighting is quite dramatic



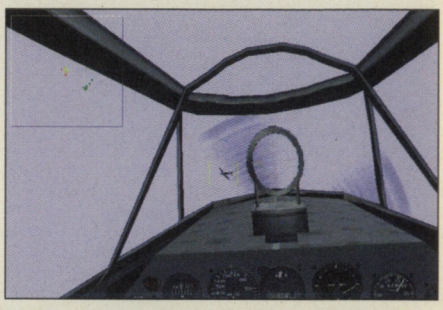
Note the engine controls in this P-47 Thunderbolt



"Boom and Zoom" with a 777 definitely qualifies as dissimilar air combat training (777 by Gary Lewis and Project Freeware, www.fs98.com)



Disassembling a hapless BF109



The virtual cockpit is extremely blocky and coarse by today's standards

pretty good in comparison to each other (just in case your retention of WW II fighter history is a bit rusty, a nicely laid out set of tables in the manual clearly outlines the pros and cons of each one). The engine controls go well beyond the call of duty, modeling not just the throttle but fuel mixture, prop pitch, and magnetos as well.

However, it's when you get into extreme conditions that the flight modeling tends to fall apart. For example, pulling a tight turn at slow speed can launch you into a spin, but it frequently turns out to be a tail-first spin with a very artificial feel to it. Stalling over the top of a half-loop often finds you hanging slow and helpless, rather than stalling and nosing over clumsily—or worse. Even the flaps are safely useable at any speed. It's not that the flight model is very bad, but it's rather strange to think that this flawed system is the same one that Microsoft has been evolving and banking on for so long as a key element in its simulation dynasty.

Flying some of the less forgiving aircraft of WW II was an exercise in finesse—one couldn't just throw the stick around recklessly like with many of today's fly-by-wire hotrods. Instead, pilots of the time knew their limits by what they felt in the seat of their pants and the response from their control stick. With this in mind, one would rightly expect force feedback to be a critical advantage for players looking for an edge. Considering Microsoft's evangelistic attitude towards force feedback, it's simply bewildering that *Combat Flight Simulator* doesn't implement feedback in a useful way. Any game can send "shake" commands to a stick as a form of tactile "eye candy" [*"finger candy"? - ed.*], but even the word "feedback" suggests a return flow of information that will help a player refine his actions. *Warbirds* got this idea right, and in fact, its implementation of force-feedback beats Microsoft's latest effort hands down.

Most of the *de rigeur* sound effects, such as landing gear and flaps, are tastefully done and have appropriate machinery sounds. The engine sounds deserve special merit, though. In big dogfights, the stereo-panning, Doppler-shifted sounds of fighters buzzing past and all around really drops the player into the thick of the action. However, the sound from other planes is too timid and high-strung, almost as if they were glow-plug radio-controlled planes flown by hobbyists instead of five tons of screaming steel and aluminum. Worse, your own engine sounds fine at startup, idle, and when it's laboring, but it's mysteriously silent at cruising speed.

Combat Flight Simulator's campaign is a real weak point—clearly showing Microsoft's lack of experience in putting together combat simulations. The missions are short and often repetitive. The actual mission design is singularly disingenuous. Even a random mission generator could put together a more sophisticated and interesting set of campaigns than the ones that ship with the game. To make matters worse, the campaign creates absolutely no sense of scope whatsoever. Microsoft has taken the approach that the game is not about the war, but rather a dry series of missions flown against a WW II backdrop.

One can't help but notice a certain unreal and "disconnected" feeling to the game. Nothing else seems to be alive anywhere else in the world except for your flight, the enemy flight, and the local ground targets. Radio traffic is little more than window dressing, and in fact your radio is nothing more than a military frequency scanner. You can't transmit a single word to your squadmates. Adding insult to injury, ground control operators frequently break in on the open channel and clearly announce that fighters have been spotted on radar. A little odd considering that radar was supposed to be a bit of a secret at the time.

Overall, Microsoft faced something of an uphill battle with *Combat Flight Simulator*. They tried to take a venerable general-aviation game engine and make it into a worthy combat simulation. What they created is a game with a real split-personality disorder. Combat simulation fans will likely find themselves agonizing at the game's quirks and inconsistencies—fatal flaws in this season's glut of WW II combat sims. However, new PC users unspoiled by a familiarity with game conventions as well as *Flight Simulator* fans longing to strap on some firepower to their favorite sim will find an entertaining—if somewhat shallow—way to blow off steam from time to time. *-Neil Mouneimne*

★★½☆☆

Combat Flight Simulator: WW2 Europe Series

Microsoft • www.microsoft.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, NT, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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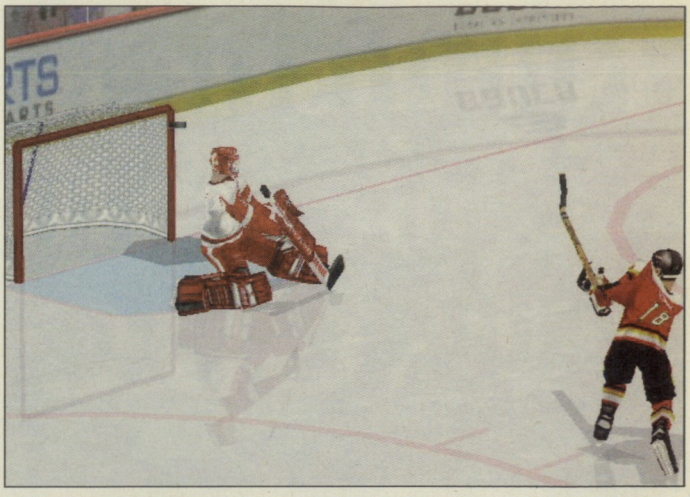
NHL 99

So close yet so far away...

NHL 99 is a puzzling and frustrating program. This latest version introduces some minor graphic improvements, some minor new problems in the commentary and gameplay, and a few improvements in the simulation aspects of the game. However, the one problem that made many hockey fans reluctantly delete *NHL 98* from their hard drives, the "goalies from another universe" at Pro and higher levels, is still present, and still incredibly frustrating and irritating.

Once again, EA Sports has no peer in presentation. No hockey fan can watch the intro without getting goose bumps: the montage of video clips and music is absolutely stirring. Once you begin a game, the sound of the national anthem is heard while the camera pans the arena, complete with flashing lights and crowd chants. Each arena is lovingly reproduced, all the way to the championship banners and retired jerseys hanging from the rafters. The players do their skate-around, the camera pans to the goalies as they nervously bang the ice and stretch their necks in preparation, and the announcers begin their pre-game banter. You can't help but being a bit awestruck at the scene being presented.

The players' real-life photos are mapped on the 3D models of the players, and they look very much like their real-life counterparts. The player animation is top-notch, from the skating and shooting to the action during the lulls, such as checking the tape on the sticks. The crowd chants realistically, and there is music specific to each arena. The reverb of the sounds of the shots, skates, and crashes into the boards is so real that if you close your eyes you can easily imagine that you are actually in an NHL arena. The graphics show some minor improvements over last year, such as the spray of ice when a player stops quickly. The display of scores from around the league, presented television-style during the game, is fun and informative.



At Pro level the computer can easily score slap shots, but you'll rarely get one by their goalie



You can edit your lines or have the computer do it for you

Though the commentary in *NHL 98* was excellent, there seem to be fewer comments in *NHL 99*, and much more repetition. The two announcers don't seem to have the same interplay, rarely bouncing comments back and forth. More disturbing, the number of completely irrelevant and downright erroneous comments is surprisingly high.

Some improvements in the simulation aspects of the game have been made—players do a significantly better job of playing their positions and will actually stretch out and grab the puck when it goes by. User control is greatly improved. The various coaching strategies, which may be changed on the fly, have a significant result on gameplay. The frantic speed of the players, while still a bit faster than reality, has been slowed down to a more reasonable pace, with the difference between players being very noticeable. Fighting is implemented, but it is truly bad; the good news is that it can be turned off. Injuries are extremely well done. A player can have an injury that lasts for anywhere from a game to a season, and the variation in the type of injury is realistic (those groin muscle pulls are a real bear).

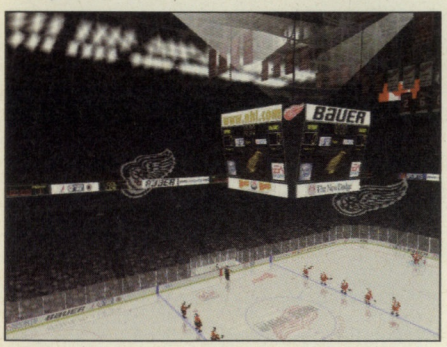
But now for the bad news. *NHL 99* includes a Beginner level for rank novices or children, and a Rookie mode, which quickly becomes too easy for anyone wanting some competition. Once you get the hang of the game, scores of 9-1 and 7-0 in your favor can become common.

On the higher skill levels, the game does become more competitive, but in a less-than-satisfying way. The computer goalies become supermen, while your goalie becomes all-too human. The chance of scoring on a clean slap or wrist shot is practically zero—your goals are almost exclusively the result of rebounds, deflections or crashing the net and having the goalie pushed or blocked out of position. (In two full 82 game seasons, one as the Red Wings and one as the Nashville Predators, a total of five clean slap shots were scored.) The computer, on the other hand, has no problem at all putting these shots into your goal.

Why the designers didn't fix this problem, which was widely proclaimed as fatal to getting your full enjoyment from *NHL 98*, is beyond speculation. But it completely ruins *NHL 99* as a hockey simulation. By making the goalies behave in the way they do, a player has two choices when playing *NHL 99*: play at Rookie level and win every game by a wide margin, or play at Pro level and accept the inability of your players to score standard NHL style goals against computer super-goalies. Perhaps the great graphics and sounds will be enough for some to overcome this deficiency; however, it's unlikely this will be the case for anyone who actually follows the NHL and wants a real hockey simulation. *–Jeff Lackey*



The new Nashville Predators are included in NHL 99



Each arena is reproduced in great detail, including banners and retired jerseys

★★★☆☆

NHL 99

Electronic Arts • www.ea.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-12 players, LAN, modem


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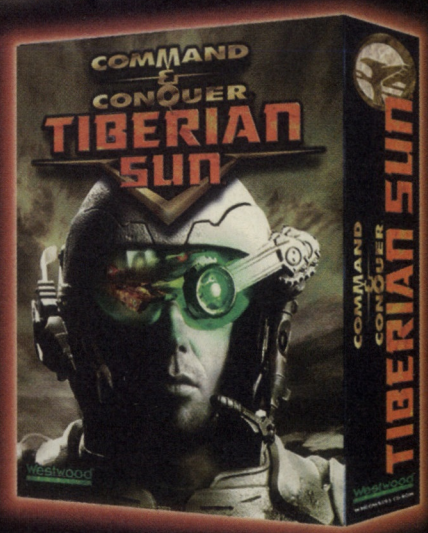
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THE STUNNING SEQUEL TO THE

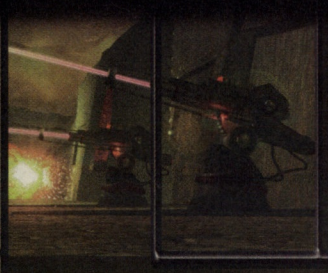
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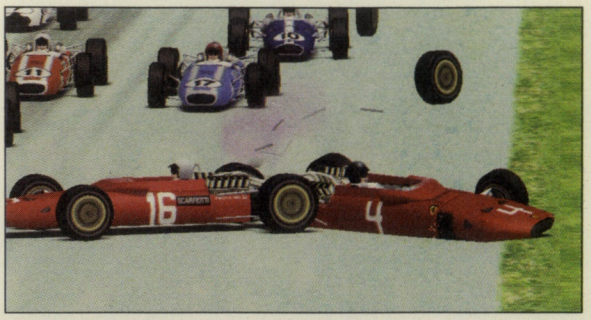
Grand Prix Legends

Spitting in the face of the casual simulation

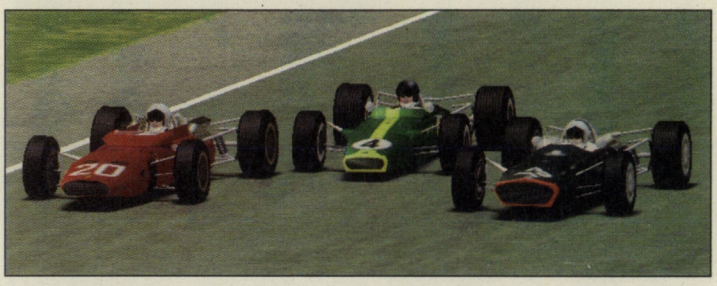


From their early days crafting the superlative *Indianapolis 500: The Simulation* through their more recent *IndyCar* and *NASCAR* games, Sierra's Papyrus division has consistently set the standard for racing simulations. With *Grand Prix Legends* they have topped themselves once again, delivering what may be the purest simulation ever created for the PC, a swaggering, chest-thumping game, one without equal in any other genre. Eschewing anything resembling a simple mode for beginners, it seems to say, "You want a mere game? Go play *Daytona USA*, race boy."

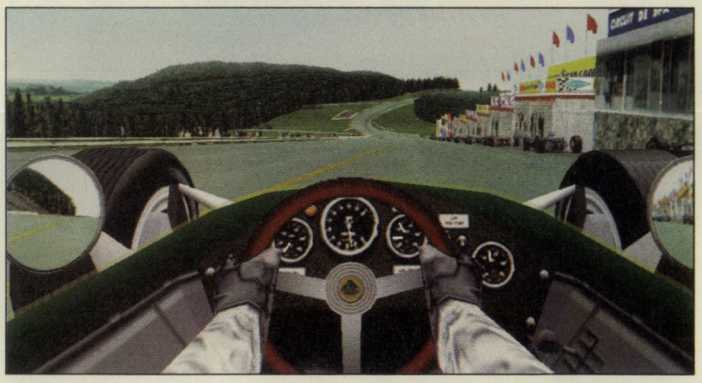
A number of new rules were introduced in the 1968 Formula 1 season to make the sport safer. *Grand Prix Legends* models 1967, the year before the drivers saw racing sanitized for their protection. As you're sliding around in one of these wingless wonder cars, it's hard not to get high on the romanticism of that racing era, the thought of drivers risking their lives by driving on the edge in a vehicle that was a 400 horsepower deathtrap with wheels.



Cars break apart realistically upon impact

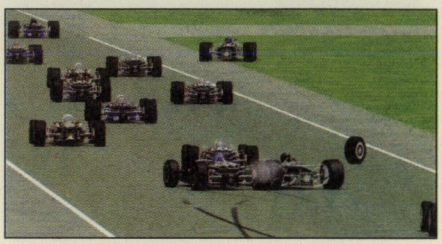


Setting the opponents up for a pass



Pulling out of the pits in Spa

The game does an unbelievable job simulating that type of vehicle. Fighter jocks can talk all they want about games like *Longbow 2* or *Su-27* being the hardest of the hardcore, but they've never faced a challenge like completing a lap in *Grand Prix Legends*, even with all driving aids enabled. It's all about the physics of driving, of weight transfer, of friction, of torque and horsepower. The resultant concoction is a wild beast of a car, one that reacts horribly at the limit of adhesion and is somewhere beyond twitchy and tail-happy. It requires the patience of a saint and the focus of a surgeon to pilot your Brabham or Eagle through the streets of Monaco or on the straights of Monza. Few games make you this nervous behind the wheel, with the feeling that you're on the brink of a crash. If you think the cars get airborne more than they should when they hit curbing or trackside objects, it's probably because the drivers of the era weren't quite as stupid as we are, or more accurately they knew the limits of their machines and didn't fly into the turns with the same reckless abandon a modern race car allows. You can't mash the brakes or stamp on the throttle when you don't have all of those aerodynamic aids pushing your car toward the ground. You will need to completely re-learn everything you know about driving a race car.



Watching the replays is incredibly fun

On the downside, all of this amazing physics modeling only works if you want to commit your life to the game. Unfortunately, most of the world would rather be a bit more casual about things and want to experience the thrill of driving the 14-mile Nürburgring without needing an advanced degree in car-dom. Papyrus scoffs at such thoughts, but beginner modes, which the game most certainly could use, do not diminish the impact of a hardcore simulation; instead, they give the game a learning curve. This game has more of a learning line—the game starts out wicked hard and eventually moves on to staggeringly difficult, never dropping to merely challenging. Even the superb AI is always set to "beat the lowly human," regardless of the skill level. Some may find that what the game gains in perceived realism it loses in outright fun.

Along those same lines, the presentation of *Grand Prix Legends* is austere to the point of being nearly boring. It's as if Papyrus is afraid to prettify any aspect of the simulation. It doesn't announce its presence with flash—it's all business. Unfortunately, in stripping the art of the simulation to its barest essentials, they left out some of the flexibility it should have had. Interested in running a 20 lap race at Watkins Glen on the hardest skill level with all damage modeling enabled? No dice, Mario. On the hardest skill level you can only race full races. And graphically the game is somewhat middle-of-the-road, supporting acceleration only with 3Dfx and Rendition cards. However, the minor graphic glitches cannot hide the fantastic job they've done visually modeling the cars and the individual pieces of their four-wheel suspension.

In the end, you may end up respecting *Grand Prix Legends* more than you'll ever enjoy it. UbiSoft's superlative *F1 Racing Simulation*, for example, is satisfying as both a simulation and an arcade game, allowing the game to be tailored to your mood. *Grand Prix Legends*, on the other hand, is the type of simulation the hardcore fringe wishes every game could be, one that screams "screw the masses, this is as *real* as it gets." While this single-minded devotion to absolute realism at the expense of some playability may spell commercial suicide, it delivers serious thrills for serious fans of serious simulations. *–Steve Bauman*

★★★★½

Grand Prix Legends

Sierra Sports • www.sierrasports.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM, joystick or steering wheel • Multiplayer: 2-20 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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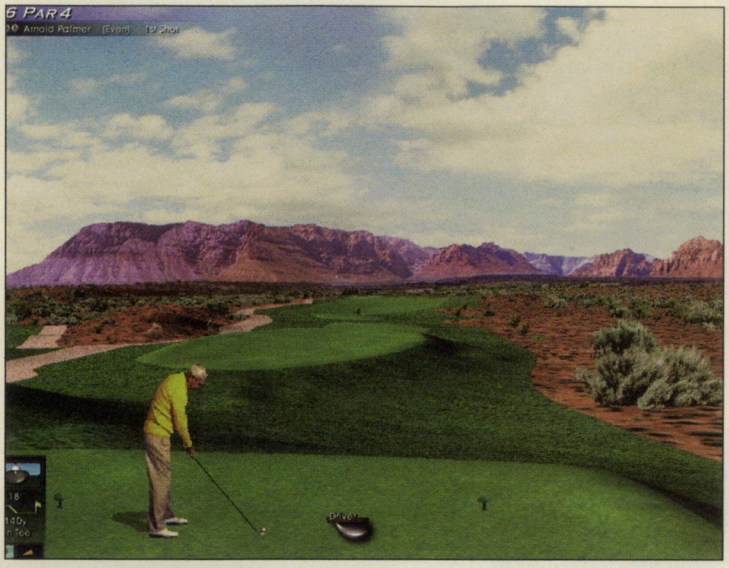
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Links LS 99

The golf master returns



Looks like a great day for golf



Beautiful Bay Hill Country Club



Using the new PowerStroke



The overhead view allows the player to aim his shot

In the world of computer golf, there is one game that is spoken of in hushed, reverential tones. With its roots all the way back to the *Leaderboard Golf* that was played on 8-bit computers across the country, the *Links* series has consistently set the standard for what golf games could and should be. Good golf games should accurately represent what the game stands for—the sport has been described as a gentleman's game, and the *Links* series, of which *LS 99* is the latest version, has always borne that out.

There has always been at least one area where the series has been head and shoulders above the competition, and that's in ball physics. It's obvious that the team has done its homework. Any fan will tell you that there is more to this than simply having a ball properly roll up or down a hill. The ball has to "react" to the terrain. If it hits on a downslope that should give it a little more "oomph" to go further down the fairway. If it hits a sideslope that should have a similar effect, only to the side. In this area, *LS 99* does not disappoint. Everything seems to be modeled to perfection, from wind effects to grass height.

After ruling this particular roost for years, the graphics in *LS 99* are merely among the best, not necessarily *the* best. Some computer duffers will no doubt whisper the words "3D acceleration," but here it would almost be out of place. You can run *LS 99* in resolutions up to 1800x1440 (not that anyone's monitor will support that) for the absolute tops in detail, but most gamers will probably want to go no higher than 1024x768, as even then screen redraws can take several seconds.

LS 99 comes with a new course, St. Andrews Links—The Old Course, and it's so well done that it alone is almost worth the price of admission. Also new are galleries for tournaments that really add to the atmosphere. In earlier editions, it was just you and your balls [*quit giggling –ed*], but now hundreds of virtual spectators watch your every swing.

Also new, and a bit controversial among long-time fans, is Access' version of the mouseswing, dubbed the PowerStroke. It really is in concept just like every other "move the mouse to swing the club" type out there; however, *LS 99* utilizes a side-to-side motion *a la* Empire's *Golf Pro* rather than the up and down motion of other games. (The more traditional 2- and 3-click methods are still available). One problem with the PowerStroke is that it does not occur in real-time—only after you have finished your stroke do you see your on-screen persona swing at the ball. It's also very sensitive to the slightest rotation of the mouse—even the smallest deviation results in a wicked slice or hook. Thankfully, using the multiple-click method doesn't detract at all from the game.

One final enhancement is a new feature that gives you the ability to design your own mode of play. Using a setup wizard, you click which rules you want to enforce and what happens in certain situations, giving you a unique game of golf. Full multiplayer support is also included, and Access has its own tournament website up (www.lstour.com) in case you find playing with yourself not as fulfilling as it used to be [*stop that giggling*].

The big question is whether or not this new edition is worth the price. That's easy, it's a definite… yes. There is a lower-cost upgrade version for previous owners, and newbies with the slightest interest in golf either real or virtual owe it to themselves to see the game that all the other companies have been trying to catch all these years. *–Joel Hulsey*

★★★★½

Links LS 1999 Edition

Access Software • www.accesssoftware.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 150MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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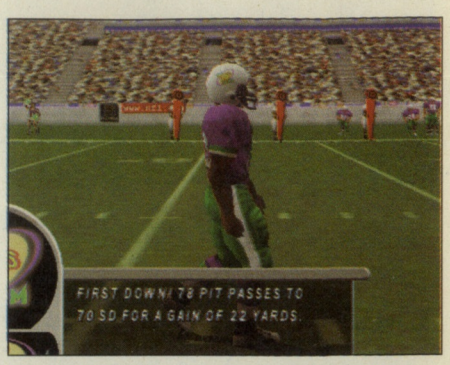
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Madden NFL 99

Pow! The big man is back with a vengeance



The "All '70s" team sports the ugliest uniforms known to man

After the debacle that was *Madden 98*, *Madden NFL 99* takes its spot at the top of the PC football chart. As with almost every sports game not called *World Cup 98*, you make some concessions with *Madden* when comparing it to the competition; however, it's somewhat ironic that the previously stodgy and "serious" Sierra Sports football line is trying to be more action-oriented, and the previous action-only *Madden* is adding the "serious" simulation and career options. While it doesn't quite reach the standards of the Sierra games, it does deliver a decent football simulation coupled with the best graphics and playability in the category.

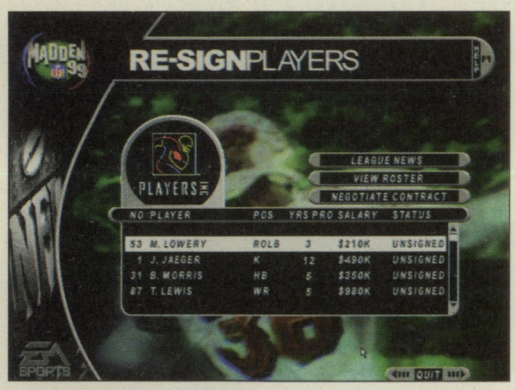
The game features excellent controls (assuming your frame rate is high enough), and finally takes advantage of more than four buttons. Newbies should be ecstatic over the inclusion of a "one-button" mode, one that chooses for you whether you want to pass, tackle or put a spin move on Deion Sanders. This feature should be standardized across the entire EA Sports line. Surprisingly, the game doesn't take into account controllers that aren't laid out like the Gravis Gamepad, forcing you to map the layout of the other controller in your head when calling plays. It's somewhat counterintuitive to consider the small "X" button on the Sidewinder the "1" button (most games map it to the "A" button).

The opponent AI is surprisingly strong, especially when compared to last year's flaccid "fluid" AI (maybe "runny" AI would have been a more appropriate name). There does not appear to be any obvious "killer play" like the ones that ruined *Madden 98*. An experienced player can still beat up on the computer, and the computer may cheat a wee bit in tight spots, but overall the solo game is challenging and entertaining.

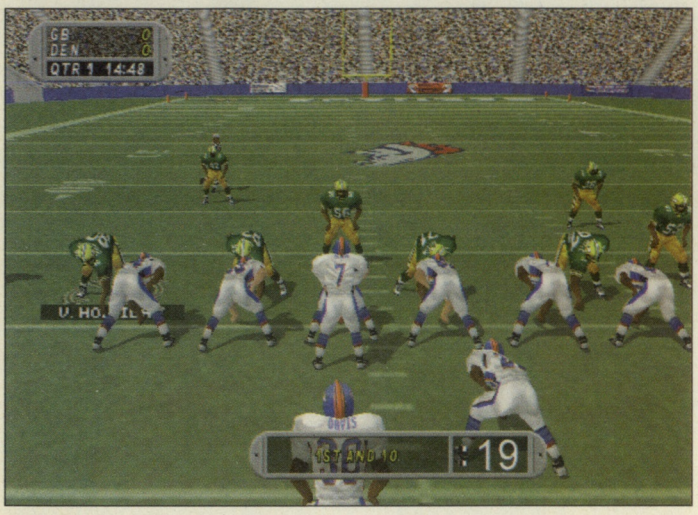


Yow, is that one good looking polygonal player, or what?

The big new addition is a true career mode, dubbed "Franchise Mode." You take over a team, draft players, sign free agents and try to keep from being thrown out on your butt after that 5-11 season. While it has most of the features you'd want to see implemented, it's not perfect. The draft and free-agent signing periods occur sequentially, with the free-agents occurring first, so you can't tell if there are some hot rookies coming out of college that could plug the holes in your offensive line. The interface is a bit too restrictive, forcing you to constantly switch back and forth to and from your roster. On the plus side, the free-agent signings occur in real-time, and you can see what teams are bidding for players and try to drive up prices so everyone blows their salary caps.



In Franchise Mode, you'll need to re-sign free agents and stay within the salary cap



Elway gets ready to run a play...

Once you're on the field, all criticisms start to melt away. Assuming you have serious hardware and a 3D accelerator card (the minimum requirements are a joke–this game is Pentium II or don't bother), this is easily the best looking sports game ever created, eclipsing all of the other previous EA Sports games that were once dubbed "the best looking sports game." The texturing on the players gives them rippling thigh pads, heads track to follow the path of the ball, chests heave as players breathe in the cold air. The animation is fantastic and the number of player moves impressive.

As always, all of these graphic details have a tendency to raise expectations that the gameplay will be on a level no game has ever managed to achieve; while not being fair, it is understandable. While you can probably blather on forever about what *Madden 99* isn't, the simple truth is that it presents an incredibly entertaining football experience. It's made a near 180 degree turnaround from last year's model, which itself is an amazing accomplishment. The perfect synergy of hardcore action and cerebral simulation hasn't been reached yet, but *Madden 99* is as close as anyone has ever managed to get, and as its management features evolve, it will no longer be, "I guess we'll have to wait until next year." Now it's more like "I can't wait until next year." *–Steve Bauman*

★★★★☆

Madden NFL 99

EA Sports • www.easports.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 8X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial, same machine

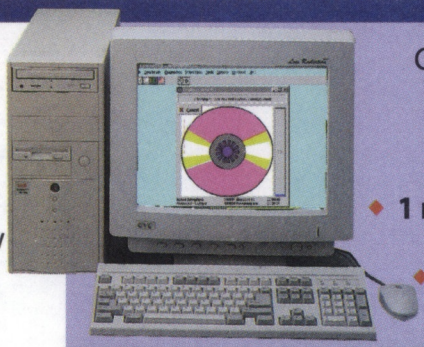
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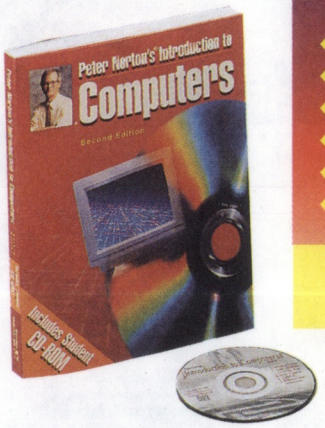
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VR Baseball 2000

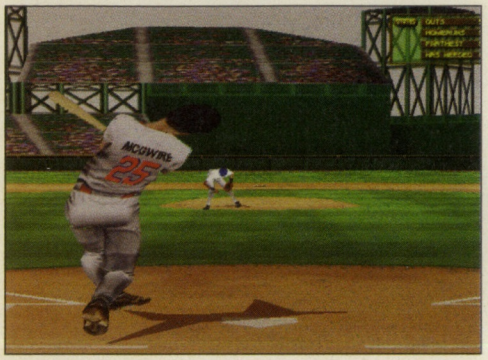
Baseball descends from the heavens



Players look like they haven't quite finished the evolutionary process

While you may question the wisdom of releasing a baseball game during the rush of new football titles, *VR Baseball 2000* has an enormous advantage over the competition: it's powered by God. Or at least "Messiah Technology," which for most of the world is utterly meaningless. Perhaps there is some enormous 3D-shooter/baseball crossover that knows that "Messiah Technology" comes from the game *Messiah* from Shiny Entertainment, and that *VR Baseball 2000* is the first game to use it—preceding even the game which gives it its name.

Unfortunately, as technologies go, "Messiah" falls well short of its pretentious name. *VR Baseball 2000* is ugly, especially when you consider the game's considerable system requirements. All of the players run around hunched over, and their legs aren't quite attached to the rest of their bodies. The swing animation isn't particularly inspiring, nor is the pitching windup.



Big Mac levitates in place while taking a mighty cut

While it's somewhat barebones in its feature set (no career mode, no play-by-play, no way to set infielders, weak sound, little flash compared to EA Sports), it makes up for it with an absolutely terrific batter/pitcher interface and remarkably variable on-field action. Few games make you feel the difference between a 90MPH fastball and a 77MPH change-up better than this game. Players throw to the right bases and substitution patterns are close to real-life. There's still the legacy of right-fielders trying to throw runners out at first, something that happens once every ten years in baseball but seems to infect every computer baseball game.

While not competitive visually with the likes of *Triple Play* and *Baseball 3D*, *VR Baseball 2000* tops both of those games with its excellent on-field action. With a few more features to help give it some long-term legs, it could be the game to beat next year. *–Steve Bauman*

★★★½☆

VR Baseball 2000

VR Sports • www.vrsports.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 200MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 3D Accelerator • Multiplayer: 2 players, same machine

Brunswick Circuit Pro Bowling

Serious bowling, but just a spare

Brunswick Circuit Pro Bowling is the newest bowling game out there [*as if there are thousands to choose from –ed*], and unlike its competition, it takes its bowling *very* seriously. It features hardware-accelerated 3D, a career play mode, multimedia bios of some professional bowlers and excellent ball and pin physics.

It offers various modes of play: exhibition, tournament, skins (frames for bucks), and a career mode in which your stats, earnings and accomplishments are an ongoing tally. As a simulation, the game shines. Everything is taken into account here: balls are rated by hook, length, backend reaction, traction, and so on. The different lanes have different oil patterns, which changes over the course of a match as the lane becomes worn, and the reaction of the pins is amazingly accurate.

So what is wrong with it?

The most glaring deficiency is a lack of female bowlers. Bowling is one sport in which women are truly on par with the men, and have mixed pairs (like tennis and golf). Not having women at all makes the game feel smaller and cramped.



Steve Jaros grumbles after a poor shot

The graphics, even with hardware acceleration, are just average. The players' bitmapped faces look creepy, and the lack of variety in body types makes everyone look too similiar, especially for bowling. The backgrounds are truly ugly. The animation of the bowler is good, though the constant switching of camera angles can be disorienting.

Finally, the game uses the old tri-click method of bowling. While perfectly acceptable, it lacks the "feel" of bowling. Some arcade games use the trackball—maybe a bowling version of TrueSwing could be great.



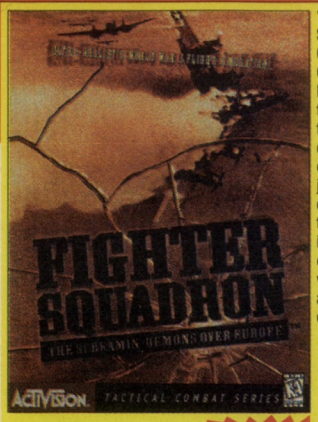
My online bowler reacts to a 7-10 split. Ouch

For the serious bowler, *Brunswick Circuit Pro Bowling* is definitely worth a look; it's just not a whole game... yet. *–Jonah Falcon*

★★★½☆

Brunswick Circuit Pro Bowling

THQ • www.thq.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, same machine

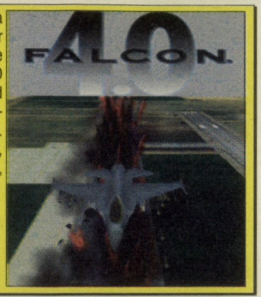


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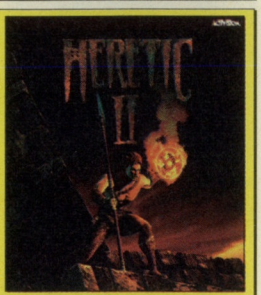
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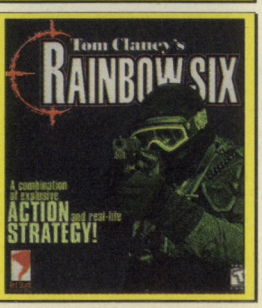
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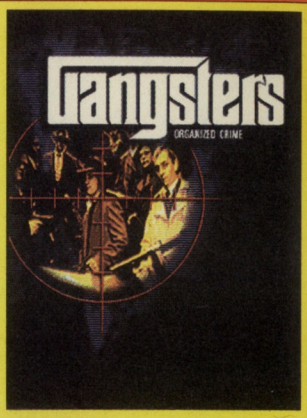
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Eidos (Strategy)
Release: 11/98
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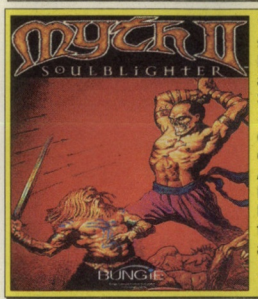
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'RAILROAD TYCOON 2' Intricate cargo web and a dynamic financial environment set the stage for you to show the world what a true Robber Baron is capable of. Schedule train routes,lay rail, build stations,trade stocks, & take over companies. An intuitive interface, beautiful terrain, detailed rolling stock & attractive buildings are sure to please the most dedicated train enthusiasts.

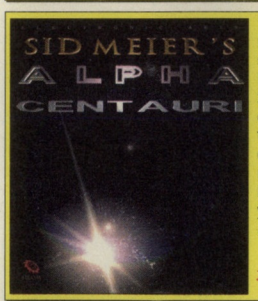
Microprose (Strategy)
Release: 11/98
PC CD

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'MYTH II: SOULBLIGHTER' is the sequel to the hugely popular Myth: The Fallen Lords, & features an improved engine with animated 3-D models, 4x finer terrain mesh, & new lighting model. New special effects include 3-D fire, ambient life, & powerful new spells. Also includes improved pathfinding, AI, & new units & terrain. More net fun with individual & team rankings and in-game alliances. **Bungie (Strategy)**
Release: 12/98
PC CD

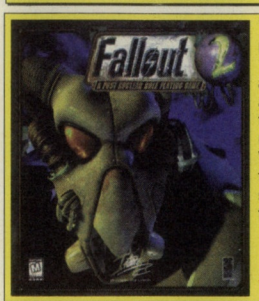
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'ALPHA CENTAURI' is Sid Meier's new turn-based empire-building strategy game. A mother ship's human cargo fleeing earth in the 22nd century splits into 7 factions en route to the self-titled destination. Colonists can terraform land, changing topography to suit needs. Determine your infant civilizations modus operendi. Design your own military with land, sea, & air units.

Electronic Arts(Strategy)
Release: 1/99
PC CD

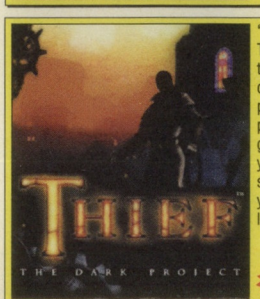
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'FALLOUT 2' is the much anticipated sequel to the best RPG of 1997! Eighty years after your ancestor, the Vault Dweller, you are chosen to prove yourself worthy of leading your people. You must travel the perilous Wastes to Vault 13, on a holy quest to find the technology your tribe needs to survive, but first you must brave the Cave of Trials.

Interplay (Roleplaying)
Release: 11/98
PC CD

$44.99



'THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT' Thief's brand-new engine, called the Dark Engine, allows for a high degree of texture detail. This first-person shooter requires more patience than brawn; study guard's patrol patterns, shroud yourself in shadow, & tiptoe stealthily from room to room as you make your way through the levels.

Eidos (Roleplaying)
Release: 11/98
PC CD

$29.99

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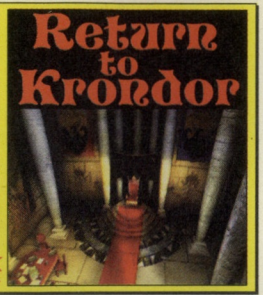
'TOMB RAIDER III' Lara's off to even more exotic locations this time around, from the blistering deserts of India to the lush islands of the South Pacific. Now you can choose your destiny by selecting the order in which you play each of the four adventures. Revamped game engine, new reflection system, vastly improved AI, new special effects (rain, snow, fire, & more).

PC CD $39.99
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Eidos (Action)
Release: 12/98

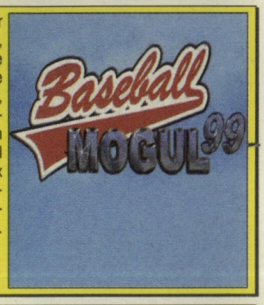
'RETURN TO KRONDOR' Assume the roles of reformed thief, Keshian sorceress, son of the magician Pug, roughhewn Warrior-Priest of Ishap, & reluctant wizard, whose magic is the group's only hope of victory. Ten plot-twisting chapters, a True3D engine, more than 150 real-time 3D characters, over 60 spells, comprehensive alchemy system, & tactically complex 3D combat.

Sierra (Adventure)
Release: 11/98
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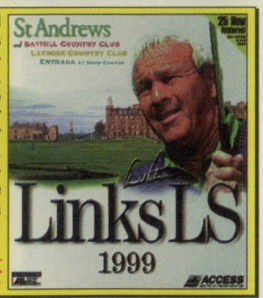
'BASEBALL MOGUL 99' Alter defensive and offensive lineups, bring up minor leaguers, make trades, sign free agents, and hire & release players. As Manager, you set the starting defense, batting order and pitching rotation for your team. As General Manager, you craft complex trades and sign players, competing with artificially intelligent player agents and general managers.

Infinite Monkey (Sports)
Release: 11/98
PC CD $28.99



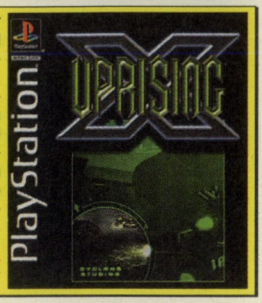
'LINKS LS 1999' Features Arnold Palmer & others at St Andrews Links Old Course, a new tournament environment, 3D objects, internet voice chat, and over 25 new play modes. New options for internet play include spectator mode and real-time voice chat. The more than 25 available add-on courses will still be compatible with Links LS 1999. Includes a new mouse swing "powerstroke".

Access (Sports)
Release: NOW
PC CD $39.99



'UPRISING X' Futuristic war immersion, with an intense blend of action & quick paced battle tactics in vast, stunning 3-D worlds. Command troops, tanks, gunships & bombers while fighting alongside them on the battlefield of the future. Over 25 levels, one-player campaign mode with unfolding story, two-player co-op mode, & two-player death matches.

3DO (Strategy)
Release: 12/98
PSX $42.99



'SONY PLAYSTATION' CD quality sound & full frame video at 30 frames/sec. This system can render up to 360,000 polygons/sec for smooth & seamless graphics. Realistic digital lighting & texture mapping, & 360 degree camera movement keeps you in the action at all times. Includes controller, backup ram, power cable & TV connector.

Sony (Hardware)
Release: NOW
PSX $139.99



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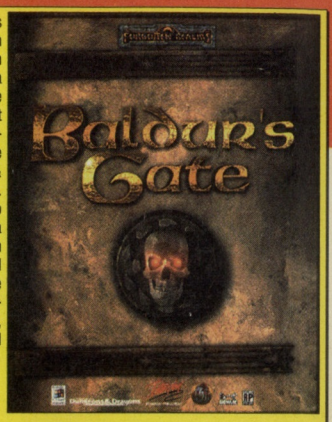
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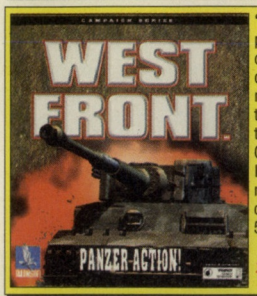
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'BALDUR'S GATE' is set in the Forgotten Realms campaign world. It features a transparent interface and gameplay that uses a real-time modification of the Advanced Dungeon & Dragons rules system. Over 60 monsters to fight; you control a party of six, each with unique abilities and personas. 5 CDs are filled with pre-rendered backgrounds, compelling music, and gameplay!

Interplay (Roleplaying) Release: 11/98 PC CD

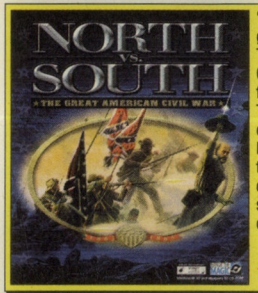
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'WEST FRONT' is a fast paced, platoon-level game of WWII tactical combat. Play in Campaign, random battle, or preset scenario format. New mission types & character promotions, new terrain features, 50 new scenarios, 8 new Campaign games, & 16 player Internet/LAN mode. Full-function map & scenario editors let you create battles from a database of 500 equipment & unit types.

Talonsoft (War) Release: 11/98 PC CD

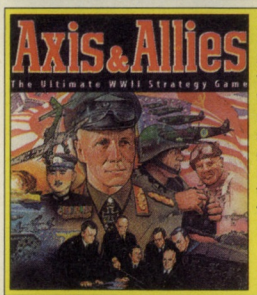
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'NORTH VS.SOUTH' Relive the greatest battles of the Eastern Theater of the American Civil War. Command Confederate or Union forces at 1st Bull Run, Gettysburg, The Wilderness and more. Integral command system emphasizes leadership in this turn-based historical wargame. Play an entire campaign or stand-alone battles solo, head-to-head over modem, or with multiplayer LAN options.

Interactive Magic (War) Release: 11/98 PC CD

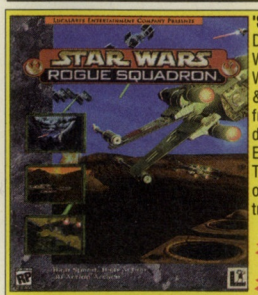
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'AXIS & ALLIES' puts you in the middle of realistic WWII action! Spearheading your country's military drive, you decide where & when to strike, & whether you make a strategic bombing raid, sneak sub attack, infantry attack, or anti-aircraft barrage. Buy armaments, develop secret weapons, & take over territory. Solo play or up to 5 players over LAN, modem, or Internet.

Hasbro (Strategy) Release: NOW PC CD

$39.99



'STAR WARS ROGUE SQUADRON' Defend the Rebel Alliance in X-Wings, Y-Wings, A-Wings, & V-Wings against TIE Fighters, AT-ATs & AT-STs. Many missions ranging from rescue to reconnaissance, dogfights to search & destroy. Explore the planets Kessel, Tatooine & Mon-Calamari. Multi-objective missions & precise control make this game stand out.

Lucas Arts (Simulation)

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Nintendo (Hardware) Release: NOW N64

$139.99

Dawn of Aces

COMPUTER GAMES STRATEGY PLUS STAMP OF APPROVAL

Online WWI air combat from the folks who brought you Warbirds

Warbirds has long been a favorite haunt for online WW II flight simulation pilots, and now iMagic Online offers something for WW I air combat aficionados. While still in infancy relative to it's WW II companion, *Dawn of Aces* is another example of just how much fun it can be to fly and fight with real people.

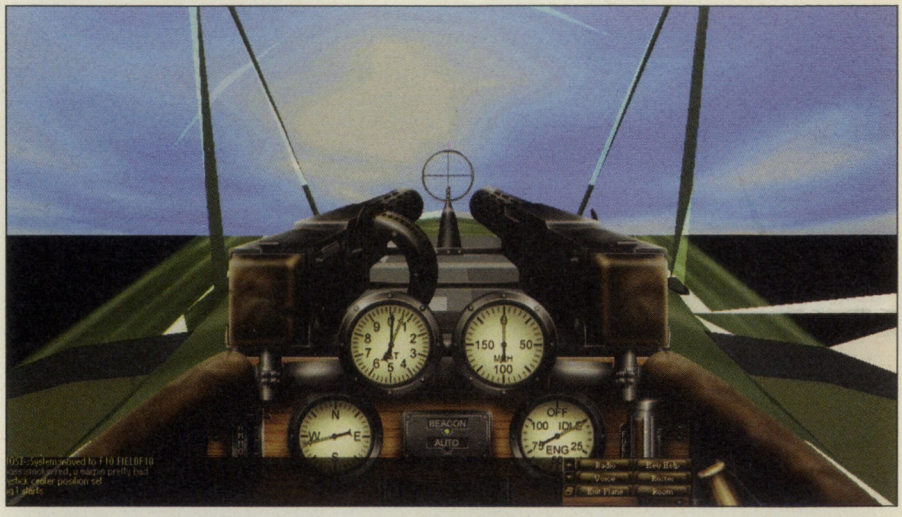
The game offers six planes at this time: the Albatros D.Va, Bristol F.2B, Fokker Dr.1, Sopwith Camel, Spad VII, and Halberstadt CL.II. iMagic Online states they will add more planes in time (the number of planes in *Warbirds* has grown in two years from nine to 50). Most online players seem to favor either the Dr.1 or the Sopwith Camel, the former offering an advantage when fighting in the horizontal, the latter sporting the superior climbing ability. Each of the planes has its own very distinctive flight characteristics, with flight models that feel very appropriate for the time period being simulated. Indeed, new pilots are killed almost as often by throwing the plane into an unrecoverable spin at low altitudes as they are by the deadly vets who inhabit the air. Stalls are presaged by the sound of a buffeting wing early enough to take corrective action.

Someone unfamiliar with the planes of the era may believe their joystick or rudders are not calibrated by the way the planes can pull hard to the left, particularly while taking off; this is merely the accurate representation of torque effects. The game's graphics are very good when utilizing the Direct3D (D3D) option, with fairly detailed ground graphics. If you don't have a good 3D card yet the good news is that the cockpit graphics are as sharp and readable in the non-3D mode. The frame rate is also excellent in both modes, with the only noticeable significant difference being the beautiful sky and ground details of the D3D version being replaced by very simple graphics. Flying and fighting is fine with either version.

While there is an off-line mode for learning the basics, the *raison d'être* of *Dawn of Aces* is the online arena. Unlike the four generic countries in *Warbirds*, *Dawn of Aces* pilots fly for either the Allies or the Central Powers, reducing the selection of available planes to on those appropriate for the chosen side. Two arenas are offered when logging in: a "relaxed" realism venue and the full realism arena. However, the relaxed realism section was normally vacant during the time of this review, while the full realism section typically had anywhere from six to 20 pilots. Frame rates were smooth and appeared to be independent of the number of players. As you might expect, some of these guys are very good (if you see "Sleepy" or "TheGef" on your tail, get ready to start again in a new plane).

Squadrons exist and if you become a regular you may receive an invitation to join, just as top pilots in WWI were invited to join elite squadrons. However, even if this is your first time to fly a WWI aircraft there's no need to feel shy or intimidated. Everyone you will run into on *Dawn of Aces* is extremely friendly and helpful, ready to welcome you into their online community (even as their bullets rip your wings into shreds). The nature of the fighting here reflects the historical reality, with dogfights that are up close and intense. Some battles may be prolonged, but the more typical result is a fairly quick kill. The difference in pilot skills is very noticeable; however, the wonderful nature of flying against another human is that even the best pilot is capable of an occasional error. The aces here know exactly where the performance envelope of their plane lies and how to fly right on the edge. That performance edge is critical; since these planes are limited in their ability to climb, most fighting is done at relatively low altitudes and a spin is often fatal. Surprisingly, in light of the apparent lengths iMagic Online has gone to provide an authentic experience, gun jamming appears to be completely non-existent: you can blast away with impunity.

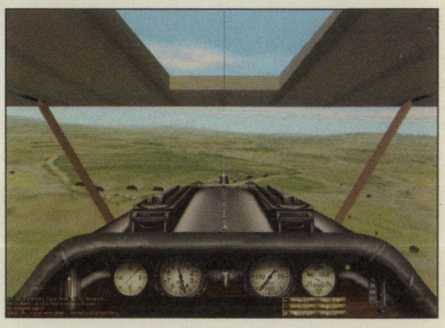
The software for *Dawn of Aces* is free for download at the iMagic Online website; online multiplayer costs $2 per hour. As addictive as this is for any flight sim fan, and particularly someone interested in the era of the "canvas falcons," you might just want to add this to your regular monthly budget. *–Jeff Lackey*



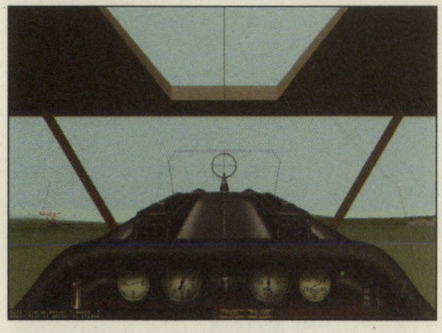
The visibility from the cockpit of the Dr.1 is fairly limited



Three Dawn of Aces vets on your tail; get ready to start over



Your Sopwith Camel has a convenient cutaway in the upper wing



The non-D3D version's cockpit is virtually identical to the D3D version's

★★★★½

Dawn of Aces

iMagic Online • www.imagiconline.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM (32MB for D3D) Multiplayer: Massively multiplayer, Internet

"Simply put, it's an essential component of any serious game player's arsenal." Michael E. Ryan PC Magazine

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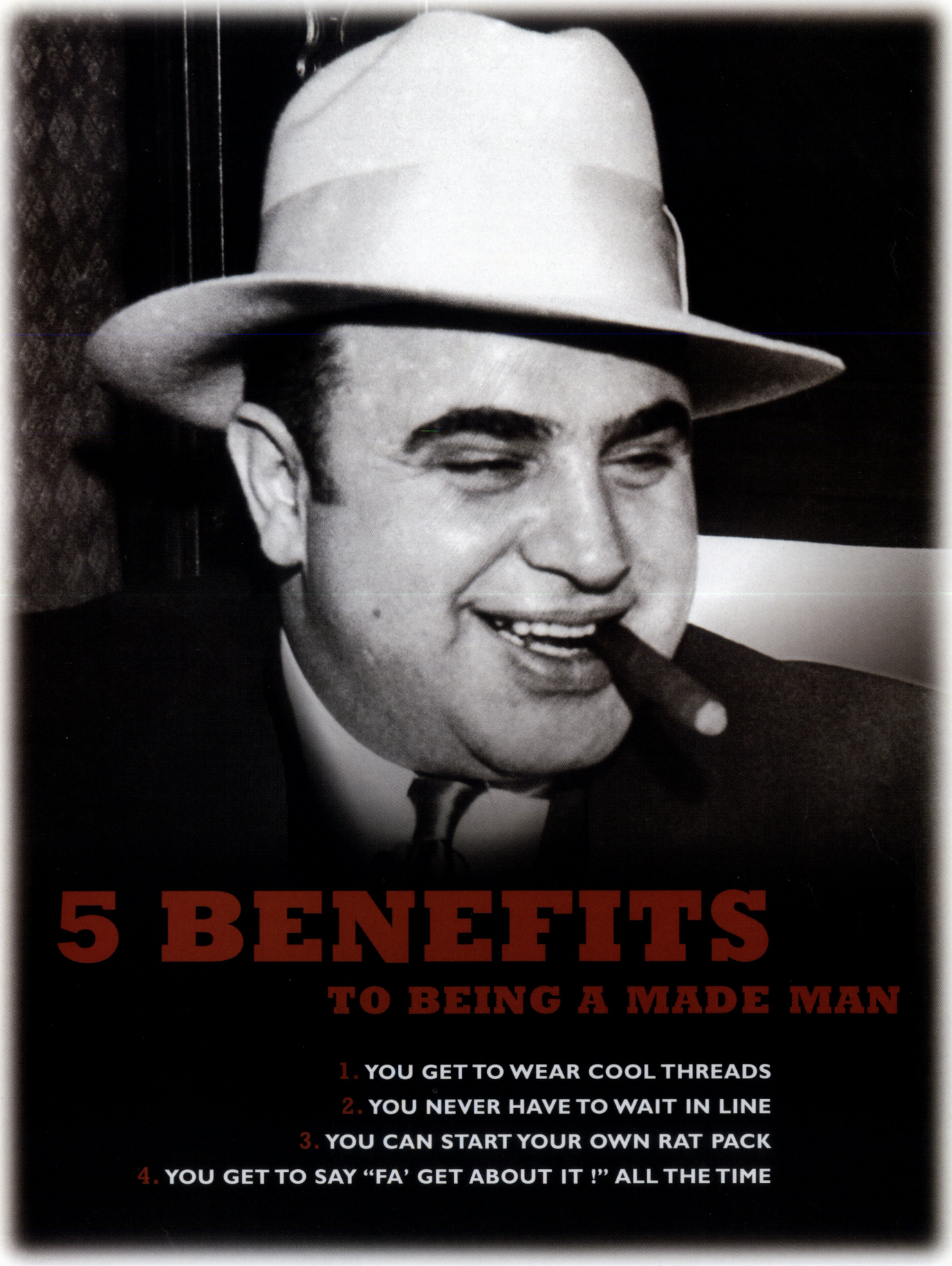
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